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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

September 13, 1895.

No. 882.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXVIII.



Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill

AND BANDBOX BILL;

OR,

THE BRAVO IN BROADCLOTH.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

TWO MYSTERIOUS SHOTS.

Two horsemen were approaching a mining-camp in a spur of the Rocky Mountains.

The two men are to-day known the wide world over, for their daring deeds have been told in history and romance, and sung in verse, for they answered there on the wild West border to the names of Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill.

Suddenly two sharp reports rung out in quick succession, fired from a distance, and the two horsemen drew rein and swung their rifles around, while their keen eyes searched ahead.

"WELL, THIS COFFIN IS TO HAVE AN OCCUPANT TO-NIGHT, GENTLEMEN, AND THE MAN IS NOW ALIVE AND IN GOOD HEALTH WHO IS TO FILL IT."

That they were in a dangerous locality they well knew, and though no whizzing bullets had followed the reports to show that they had been the targets at which those who fired the shots had aimed, it was necessary to be upon their guard.

"We were not their game, I guess, Bill, because no man could fire so wild as that," remarked Buffalo Bill composedly.

"No, but yonder is where the shots came from, fully half a mile away," and Wild Bill pointed up the mountain-side further down the valley, where two little white clouds of smoke were floating away from a rocky spur almost hidden in pines.

"There is a cabin there, too; but what were they shooting at?"

And Cody had already leveled a powerful field-glass he had swung to his belt at the spot indicated by his comrade.

"Don't know, Buffalo; but if the shots were at us we will know the reason, so come on, for I am going visiting."

"Up to the cabin?"

"Yes."

"I am with you, Bill, for I am curious about those shots."

And the two scouts rode on down the valley. Just a hundred yards from where they halted was a group of bowlders, with a few stunted pines scattered about among them.

Here the two Bills suddenly drew rein, for behind a large rock lay two men—two bodies, rather—whose positions were strange ones, indicating how suddenly they had died, for both were dead.

Upon the top of the rock, which was some six feet in height, and sloped off to the ground, was the branch of a pine-tree, which concealed the heads of the two dead men, whose rifles covered every person coming down the valley trail as Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill had been doing.

The men lay flat upon the rock, their arms resting upon the summit and their rifles in their grasp, the finger of one actually on the trigger guard.

Their faces were now pressed close to the rock, and in the back of the head of each was a bullet-hole from which the warm life-current was just beginning to flow.

The men were clad in buckskin, were well-armed, wore top-boots, and their slouch hats were near them on the rocks.

"Those fellows were not bad shots, after all, Buffalo, for they brought down their game," Wild Bill observed.

"Yes, and just in time to be the game of these two gentlemen."

"Ah! you think they were in ambush for us?"

"Don't you see that they were, Bill?"

"I had not thought of that."

"Then look at their faces, and see if they are not two of the Toll-Taker's gang."

"By the Rockies, but you are right, Buffalo! They have been trailing us until they knew where we were going, and then switched round ahead and ambushed us."

"It was a close call for us, Buffalo, for I confess I didn't expect trouble here."

"Nor I, and they would have struck us sure, if—"

"Those who fired those shots had not been mighty quick."

"Yes, and dead shots as well."

"But could they have come from the hill yonder?"

"Where else?"

"Correct! but it was a long range and dead-center shooting."

"And were these men killed to save us?"

"That's what we must find out— Ah! there are the horses the gentlemen came on!"

The two scout pards rode forward to where they had discovered two horses hitched to a small pine tree.

The animals were fastened so that they could be hastily unhitched, if need came for it, and their appearance indicated that they had been hard-riden.

The trail of the horses led from down the valley, and had either come from the mining-camps three miles away, or through a canyon that cut through the right-hand range beyond the rocky spur from whence had come the two shots.

"We'll leave them here, Buffalo, while we go up yonder and investigate."

"Yes, Bill," and the scouts branched off from the trail and soon after began to ascend the mountain-side toward the rocky spur before referred to.

The way they had to go made the distance about three-quarters of a mile, but when nearing the spur they got into a trail and readily followed it to the summit.

As they neared the point, they beheld, half-hidden among the bowlders and pines, a small log-cabin, with a shed behind it.

The trail led to the rear of the cabin, and both Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill rode along with their rifles ready for instant use.

About a hundred feet from the cabin, on a grass-plot, was staked out a large, long-bodied, jet-black horse that eyed the intruders curiously.

Then came the sharp bark of a dog, which,

however, was hushed at once by the stern tones of a man.

Nearing the cabin, a horse was seen standing by the open door of the shed, saddled and bridled.

The animal was a match for the one staked out, and also was as black as ink, while his saddle and bridle were of the Mexican pattern and somber-hued in appearance.

A dog stood at the corner of the cabin, and his eyes were upon the scouts, while his look was vicious as that of an aroused tiger.

This animal on guard was a huge one and black as were the horses.

"Black horses, black outfit, black dog—next we'll see a nigger, Buffalo," suggested Wild Bill, as the two rode around to the front of the cabin, ready to meet friend or foe.

CHAPTER II.

A GENTLEMAN IN BLACK.

"GOOD-EVENING, gentlemen."

"Dismount, and accept my hospitality for the night, for you are heartily welcome."

So said a man who stood in front of the little cabin on the spur, up to which Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill had ridden.

They came to a halt and gazed with surprise upon the speaker—a man, six feet in height, broad-shouldered, superbly formed, and clad from head to foot in black.

It was black broadcloth, too—the pants being stuck in top-boots, on the heels of which were gold spurs of the Mexican pattern.

His coat was double-breasted, close-fitting, and buttoned up to his chin, where was visible a white collar that gave him a clerical look, which was added to by his closely-shaven face.

His hair was worn long, falling below his shoulders, and was jet-black, and upon his head was a very broad-brimmed black sombrero encircled by a gold cord.

But his face? That was a study, and a strong one.

A handsome face it was, perhaps of a man of thirty, though it was hard to tell his age, the features cast in a refined mold and every one stamped with indomitable will, fearlessness and strength of character.

The eyes reminded one of the large, expressive, sad orbs of a deer that has been wounded, and the same thought flashed through the mind of each scout:

"What grand eyes for a woman's face!"

The teeth were even, milk-white, and brightened up the otherwise somber face.

At one side of the cabin was a work-bench and a box of carpenter's tools, and the strange man in black stood by a coffin which had just been stained to an inky hue, the paint-brush then being held in one hand as he turned and faced the two scouts.

That the coffin had lately been made was shown by the fresh shavings under the work-bench.

"Well, pard, you are very kind, but we have come up here on a business trip, so don't expect to stay long," said Wild Bill in his quiet, cynical way.

"How can I serve you, gentlemen?"

"We are not in search of wooden overcoats, like the one you have just built there, though we came rather near being in need of one each awhile since; but we would like to know who fired two shots from this spur half an hour ago?"

"I did," was the calm response of the stranger.

"You fired both of them?" asked Wild Bill, who was acting as spokesman.

"Yes, sir."

"What with?"

"My repeating-rifle," and the man took from where it stood behind the coffin, within reach of his hand, a handsome weapon of the latest manufacture, and which was painted black, barrel and stock, but gold-mounted.

"You fired at two men in the valley?"

"Yes, there they lie upon that rock to the left of the trail you were following."

"You killed them both?"

"Yes, I fired to kill, and aimed at their heads."

"There's where your bullets hit, pard; but, may I ask why you shot them?"

"It was their lives, or yours, and as they were cut-throats, and you gentlemen I recognized, I concluded that I would cut down the weeds and save the wheat."

The stranger spoke in a voice of peculiar richness of tone, and with a manner that was full of calm dignity, which could not but impress the two scouts.

"You recognized us, you say?"

"Yes, as I did those men. You see from my position here, I look over into the canyon which cuts this range, and I saw those men riding at full speed toward the valley."

"They turned up the trail and rode to yonder rocks, where they dismounted and went into ambush."

"Soon after you came along, and my glass showed me who you were, so I fired to save you, and that is all there is about it, gentlemen."

"And a great deal it is, for we owe you our lives, and I for one never go back upon a man

who has saved me from death, while my pard here is like me in that respect."

"I know that well, Wild Bill, of you, and of Buffalo Bill also."

"You do know us!" cried Wild Bill, in surprise.

"So I said."

"May I ask where we have met before, sir?" asked Buffalo Bill, in vain striving to recall the face of the man before him.

"Neither of you know me, though I do you; but, will you not dismount and share my cabin for the night?"

"Thank you, no. Those two fellows must be buried before night, for I cannot leave even an Indian to become food for wolves. Then we must go on to the mining-camps below," answered Cody.

"To Glory Hallelujah?"

"Yes; that is what the miners call their camp."

"It hardly deserves the name, as you will discover; but I will meet you there to-night, for I have business to call me there later."

"Well, we will be glad to meet you again, I assure you, for we fully appreciate what you have done for us, and we will be glad to know your name."

"My name, gentlemen, may seem as out of place as that of Glory Hallelujah City; but then, you know, the miners have a way of calling a man by whatever name that may suit their fancy, so, as I dress above the average of ordinary border mortals, they call me Bandbox Bill, and, not knowing me, they also dubbed me the Unknown, while, on account of other peculiarities I have, they dub me the Undertaker and The Man in Black."

"I am rich, you see, in names, gentlemen, so take your choice."

The man was becoming more of a mystery than ever to the two scouts, who regarded him with an interest akin to awe.

Then Buffalo Bill remarked:

"Well, my friend, as we cannot go back upon our own names we will call you Bandbox Bill, and certainly you do look more like a city swell than a frontiersman."

"Yes, Buffalo, Bandbox Bill goes for our new pard, and I hope we'll meet you to-night in Glory Hallelujah City," Wild Bill added.

"I will be there without fail, gentlemen, and you'll find me at the Queen of Hearts Saloon, which adjoins Kate's Kitchen, as the best tavern there is called."

"Yes, we put up at Kate's Kitchen, and will drop in at the Queen of Hearts and see you, so don't fail to be there, pard."

"Do you see this?" and Bandbox Bill placed his hand lightly upon the coffin.

"Yes, it has been a very conspicuous object in my eyes ever since I rode up here," Wild Bill answered.

"Well, this coffin is to have an occupant to-night, gentlemen, and the man is now alive and in good health who is to fill it, so I'll be there," said the Unknown, with a strange significance in tone and look.

Neither Buffalo Bill nor Wild Bill made reply.

There was something so uncanny in the words of the strange man, and his look, that they could not find response, so bowed and rode down the trail.

"Buffalo."

"Yes, Wild Bill," and as the two had again reached the valley, Buffalo Bill rode up alongside of his companion.

"That Gentleman in Black just lays over any one I ever saw."

"He is certainly a mystery."

"Yes, and I must know more of him."

"We can doubtless find out about him in Glory Hallelujah City."

"Glory Hallelujah City? What a name!"

"And the Queen of Hearts Saloon and Kate's Kitchen, too!"

"Yes, we have got among a queer lot, Buffalo; but we came for a purpose, and must carry it through."

"Yes, we must do that," was the determined reply of Buffalo Bill, and the two scouts drew rein by the rock upon which lay the two bodies of the men who had been killed while lying in ambush to kill.

"A remarkable shot, that man, Buffalo."

"He is, indeed; but what about the horses of these men?"

"To the victor belong the spoils, Buffalo, so we'll take them with us and turn them over to the Unknown to-night; but now let us bury these fellows with a thanksgiving prayer that they failed to connect," and the two scouts dismounted and set to work upon their task.

CHAPTER III.

THE WOUNDED SCOUT.

"Doc, I've got a piece of lead in my shoulder I wish you would please take out for me," and the speaker dismounted before the log-cabin of an army surgeon at Fort L—.

The surgeon arose quickly from a table where he was writing, out under a large tree, and as he stood erect his splendid form showed to perfection in his undress uniform, while his slouch hat shaded a face that was strong in

character, fine-looking, and in the dark, piercing eyes was a look to do and dare any danger.

The wounded man was dressed in buckskin leggings, cavalry boots, a gray sombrero and hunting-shirt, and his left arm hung limp at his side.

His form was compactly built, with broad shoulders, and his movements were quick and decided.

His face was bright, expressive, and a reckless expression rested upon his lips and dwelt in his eyes, while his long brown curls gave him a look a trifle effeminate, unless a person regarded him closely.

The man was Texas Jack, a noted ranger of the Lone Star State, who had gone to the Northwest and become a scout of the plains.

His hunting-shirt was stained by the life-blood flowing from his wound, and yet he made light of it as he took a seat and stripped his shoulder to the gaze of Surgeon Frank Powell.*

"Why, Jack, how did you get this wound?" asked Surgeon Powell as he probed it, and which act did not cause the scout to even flinch.

"Oh, it was the Toll-Takers of the Rockies, Doc, for they ambushed me as I came along; but I got through."

"Yes, so I see, and this bullet nearly got through, too; but it is lodged all right, and I'll have it out for you soon, and you will be all right in a few days."

"So it was the Toll-Takers, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! here is the bullet, so keep it as a souvenir; but, Jack!"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell."

"Let us set to work to run those Toll-Takers to earth."

"Just say the word, doctor, and I am with you."

"Well, you know that I had an idea of taking their trail some months ago, along with Wild Bill, Buffalo Bill and yourself, but the 'Two Bills, as the boys call them, were ordered to Fort B—, and so I gave it up."

"But I have, in my solitary scouts, secured considerable information about this lawless band, and I believe that we can go together and hunt them down."

"I am with you, Doc."

"I have discovered that they have no special retreat or working-place, but roam from trail to trail, camp to camp, and with an occasional visit to the settlements."

"Now, I am sure that the lawless bands that are said to infest all the trails are no other than the Toll-Takers—one and the same outfit."

"They are splendidly mounted, have agents who run off their plunder and sell it for them, and are under a skillful and daring chief."

"But, Jack, you and I can take their trail and hunt them to their proper end."

"So say I, doctor, and I am ready at any time."

"You'll not be fit for the work under two weeks. In the mean time I'll get leave to go on a special duty and take you with me, and there is no need to tell you how dangerous is the work."

"I know it, doctor, but I have gone hand-in-hand with death so long that it does not scare me as once it did."

"I know your pluck, Jack. There, your wound is dressed; and come regularly and let me look after it."

"I will, thank you; but, doctor?"

"Yes."

"There is one thing I would like to ask you."

"Yes, Jack."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

Surgeon Powell laughed, for Texas Jack had asked the question in such a sober manner.

"I mean it, Doc."

"No, Jack; I have never had any superstitious dread of the dead since I dissected my first subject in the Louisville Medical College."

"You had up to that time, then?"

"Well, yes. You see, I had trouble with a wild fellow who, when drinking, always sought a quarrel with me. Once I was forced to knock him down, and the next night, as I was about to leave my room to go to the college, he attacked me, along with several others."

"I defended myself, for I saw that they meant to kill me, and shot my enemy through the body."

"I sent a physician to him, and he recovered and left town, I heard, while I was exonerated from blame in the matter."

"A year after my fellow-students brought a subject to the dissecting-table one night, which they wished me to operate upon. They said it was a case of a man who had been wounded over a year before, and had just died of the wound."

"I drew back the sheet and there lay my old enemy!"

"It was a terrible shock to me, and it did seem as though he had kept his vow to haunt me."

*Surgeon Frank Powell, of the army, is too well known as a hero of romance and history to need much said of him here. After a life of strangest adventure, he is now practicing medicine in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and known to his Indian friends as "White Beaver."—THE AUTHOR.

"But you will give me credit for having strong nerves, I believe, and I showed then what they were, for I did not flinch, but remarked:

"I know this man, gentlemen, for I gave him this wound, and his case will be a deeply interesting one."

"The students regarded me with almost horror, but I went to my work, followed the track of the bullet and showed the eventual cause of death."

"Since then, Texas Jack, I have never had an atom of superstition in my nature; but why did you ask if I was superstitious?"

"Because I have seen a ghost," replied Jack.

"Indeed? When and where?"

"In the Haunted Range, which you know the trail to Rock Outposts runs through."

"Yes."

"It was a woman, on horseback, and if she was not a ghost then I would give much to know what she is."

"White-faced, wearing a flowing snowy robe and mounted upon a milk-white steed, I suppose?"

"No, Doc, she was dressed in black, wore a sable veil, and her horse was just about the hue of charcoal."

"The ghost of a negress perhaps?"

"No, for her face was oh, so white."

"Well, Jack, our trip after the Toll-Takers will take us through the Haunted Range, so we'll look up your sable ghost too; but now go to your quarters and get rest, and do not work or fret yourself," and the scout obeyed, while Surgeon Powell returned to his writing once more.

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

"WHAT is it, driver?" and heads peered out of the windows of the coach on each side, as one of the passengers asked the question.

It was on the Overland stage-trail running toward the further Land of the Setting Sun, as the far West is poetically called.

The time was at a period in the earlier history of the Overland stages when it tried the nerve of men to go to the West by coach, for those were the days when Indians haunted the trails, the roads were dangerous, the habitations few and far between, and there were bands of outlaws ever ready to kill and rob the daring ones who ventured to go West.

It was a bright moonlight night, but the moon was not many days old, so threatened soon to go down behind a lofty range of mountains and leave the trail in darkness.

The coach was a fine one, large, roomy and comfortable, the passengers were six in number and the driver was a veritable king of the reins, for no better man ever held the ribbons over a Rocky Mountain stage team, and he had won, from his wonderful night drives through dangers the name of Old Owl Eyes, though he wrote himself down on the stage books as Kit Keene, which his pards immediately transposed into Keen Kit.

The coach had reached a part of the trail which descended into a valley, where was a swift-flowing stream bridged with a rude structure that looked very shaky to cross by day, and doubly so at night.

The bridge was the *bête noir* of all drivers on the Overland who had ever been compelled to cross it, not only on account of the perilous undertaking, but because right there had more deeds of red devilry been committed than anywhere else upon the line.

Upon either side of the bridge, near the road, was a little burying-ground, and fully a score of victims of red-skins and outlaws rested in one, while in the other were the graves of a dozen outlaws and Indians killed in attacks upon the coaches.

The mountains which sheltered this valley were known as the Red Range and the Haunted Range, and not a driver on the Overland ever cared to be caught there by night, though it often happened that they were.

It was before descending into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, as a traveler had once called it, and which name had clung to it since, that Old Owl Eyes had come to a sudden halt.

As he made no reply, the questioner again asked:

"What is it, driver?"

"You has eyes, hain't yer?"

"Yes," came in a chorus from the passengers.

"Then look ahead on ther trail," replied Keen Kit, pointing with his whip to where a woman in black, mounted upon a black horse, plainly revealed in the moonlight, barred their way.

An exclamation of surprise, mingled with alarm, came from the lips of the passengers, while one said:

"A woman! and in this wild region?"

"Yes," laconically answered Kit.

"Are you afraid of her, driver?"

"More'n I am of any man as lives."

"Who is she?"

"I knows her as ther Woman in Black."

"Drive on past her."

"See here, pard, don't be too flip with yer advice, for I knows jist what I am doing, and I hain't been picked up fer a fool many times."

"Do you intend to stay here all night, driver, because a woman bars your way?" asked a stern voice, and a man in the uniform of an army officer sprung out of the stage.

"Sh, cap'n! Wait!"

The officer seemed impressed by the manner of the driver.

He knew his courage but too well, and so he stood gazing upon the strange horsewoman.

They stood like a statue—horse and rider—directly in the trail, and the moonlight revealed them distinctly.

The woman's face seemed ghastly white, while from her head to the end of her long skirt she was enveloped in black.

Her horse was also jet-black, and stood as still as though carved of stone.

The right hand of the woman was raised, the palm toward the coach, as though warning them back from the Valley of the Shadow of Death ahead.

"Shall I go forward and speak to her, Kit?"

"No, cap'n; don't do it."

"What is to be done, then?"

"Wait."

"Well, I'll humor you, Keene, for I know your undoubted pluck; but if she detains us beyond five minutes, I will go forward and see just who this Shadow of the Overland is, as they call her."

"You has heard o' her, cap'n?"

"Yes, Kit."

"I has seen her twice afore."

"Well?"

"She warned me then."

"Yes."

"I didn't heed her."

"And the result?"

"Is some graves down in ther walley."

"Ah! on each occasion?"

"Yes; each time, cap'n, thar was ghosts made."

"I'll give you ten minutes' delay, Kit."

And it was evident that the army officer was influenced by the manner and words of the driver.

"All right, cap'n."

And Kit kept his eye upon the Woman in Black.

The minutes passed slowly; still the woman held her position, as still as statues, horse and rider.

At last the captain grew impatient and said: "I am going ahead, Kit."

He moved a few paces, when the woman slowly turned her horse and rode under the dark shadow of a cliff, where she halted, but was yet seen.

Her hand was seen to move as though she was waving it; and, a moment after, she wheeled her horse suddenly and rode away rapidly, her horse's hoofs giving back no sound upon the rocky trail.

Quickly the captain walked forward. He halted near the cliff, and then called out to Kit to drive on.

The driver obeyed, and, as the coach pulled up, all saw written upon the cliff in what appeared to be letters of fire—

"Go back, for Death awaits you ahead on this trail!"

"What does it mean?" gasped a passenger.

"Didn't I tell yer?" Keen Kit returned.

"Well, Kit, what do you intend to do?" asked the captain.

"I hain't no fool, cap'n."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see them letters o' fire?"

"Nonsense! It is written with phosphorus, and if the moonlight fell upon the rock it could not be seen, as in the dark."

"It is a warnin' in letters of fire, cap'n."

"Well, Keene, I've got to go through, so if you wish to camp from fear of danger ahead do so, and I'll take one of your leaders and go on," said the captain, impatiently.

"No, cap'n, don't do that, but git upon the box with me, for I knows yer wuth, and we'll drive through."

"All right, Kit."

"But not on *this* trail."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll go by the Devil's Turnpike, cap'n."

"Kit."

"Yes, captain."

"If any other man than you suggested going by that wild trail, I'd set him down as a fool."

"I drove it once, cap'n."

"I heard so, to escape a freshet down the canyon, and saved the lives of all in doing so."

"I'll go that way, cap'n."

"It is as dangerous as risking this trail, Kit."

"No, cap'n, it's sure death in the walley, but big chances going round by the Devil's Turnpike, and it's shorter, too."

"Yes; but go ahead for I am with you, go which way you may," and the captain leaped up to the box and turning his horses around Keen

Kit started back on the trail to where he would have to take the terrible road known as the Devil's Turnpike.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER ORDERS.

"You sent for me, Colonel Royston?" and Buffalo Bill entered the headquarters of the commandant of Fort K—, where he was serving as chief of scouts.

"Yes, Cody, for I am anxious to place in your hands the solving of a frontier mystery, and also the bringing to justice of the lawless band known as the Toll-Takers of the Trail," answered Colonel Royston, a handsome man and every inch a soldier.

"I am at your command, colonel, for any duty you may wish me to perform," answered the scout.

"I am always sure of that, Cody, and know that I can count upon you.

"I am sorry to send you away upon a mission of desperate risk, I may say, but I have confidence in your coolness, judgment and skill, and believe you, of all men, can do what I wish done.

"Sit down, for Captain Alf Taylor will be here in a few minutes and I wish you to hear his story."

"He has just returned from Salt Lake, sir, I believe."

"Yes, and has a strange story to tell, which urged me to no longer delay in sending you upon the duty I have in mind.

"Captain Taylor is anxious to go, himself, but I cannot spare him just now, so you must pick your own comrades for the work.

"If any officer other than Taylor told me what he did, I would be a little doubtful; but, as you know, Alf Taylor is no man to be frightened, and is cool as an icicle under all circumstances—ah! here he is now."

Just then there entered a tall, slenderly formed man, yet possessing a fine physique, his carriage upright and martial.

He was in the undress uniform of a captain of cavalry, and certainly was a very striking looking person.

It was the same officer who had sprung from Keen Kit's coach on the Overland Trail when the Woman in Black barred the way.

He saluted the commandant politely, shook hands with Cody and remarked:

"Glad to see you, Bill. I dropped in to see you last night, but was told you were away on a scout."

"Yes, captain, I got back at dawn, and was glad to hear of your return, for we missed you over in our quarters," returned the scout.

"Taylor, I sent for Cody, after our talk this morning, for I have decided that he is the best man to send upon this mission."

"By long odds the best, colonel."

"Well, let Cody know of your adventure, and then I will tell him what I wish him to do."

"It is a long tale, Bill, but it is a strange one.

"You know Keen Kit, I believe?"

"Old Owl Eyes of the Overland, sir?"

"Yes."

"I know him well, sir, and he is the king of drivers, while he has the courage of a grizzly bear."

"You are right. I went West on Kit's hearse, as they call the coaches, and returned with him also.

"I was behindhand on sleep going out, so was taking a nap inside the coach when two shots awakened me.

"I discovered that Kit was in a skirmish with road-agents, or, as they call them there, Toll-Takers of the Trail, and so I went to his aid.

"There were but three of them and one got away, the other two remaining for reasons unnecessary to state.

"Kit informed me that as there were but three he concluded to fight when they held him up, and thought it not worth while to waken me.

"This showed me my man, and so I arranged to catch his coach coming back.

"I had ridden on the box the night and day before, to escape being talked to death by a Jew, an Irishman and an Englishman talking American politics, so the next night left the box for a few hours' sleep inside.

"I was awakened by voices and found that Kit had drawn rein, so, as I heard some one say there was a woman in the trail ahead, I got out."

The captain then told of the adventure with the Woman in Black, and Buffalo Bill remarked:

"They call her the Shadow of the Overland."

"Yes, so I heard; but after that warning, written with punk upon the rocks, Kit would not go on, but decided to take a breakneck trail known as the Devil's Turnpike."

"I have heard of it, sir."

"Yes, and Kit had driven over it once; but that any wheeled vehicle could go that way I would never have believed had I not been there to see for myself.

"Why, at two places we had to unhitch the team, and with ropes let the coach down the steep hill, yes, and hold back on the horses, too,

as they went down, to prevent their breaking their necks.

"Kit made the Englishman, the Jew and the Irishman do the most work by scaring them with stories of soon being pursued and murdered by the Toll-Takers, so I had my revenge for my sleepless night and day.

"It took us three hours to go seven miles, and I'll give Kit Keene a prize as the best driver I ever saw handle the reins.

"We cut off about eight miles by the turnpike, and did not go through the valley where that arch outlaw they call Major Mephisto and twenty of his band of cut-throats were lying in wait for us.

"That Kit carried a treasure-box aboard, and I had considerable Government money along, will prove that we made a fortunate escape, while, had we resisted, not one of us would have been spared by the red-handed fiends."

"You said that the western-bound coach met the same band, captain?"

"Yes, colonel; Major Mephisto waited for us until dawn and, enraged at finding from a scout that we had turned on the ridge and gone by the Devil's Turnpike, he shot the driver of the westbound coach and two passengers, as the Pony Express messenger who passed us on the trail the next day told us."

"Now, Cody, you have heard the captain's story?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you think of this Woman in Black?"

"She is a mystery, colonel."

"She certainly is."

"Do you think, Bill, she is in any way connected with Major Mephisto and his Toll-Takers?" asked Captain Taylor.

"It would seem so, sir, for she knew of the ambush prepared for you."

"Yes, and warned us."

"Well, Cody, it is my wish to have you solve the mystery about this woman.

"If she is guilty of being in league with the Toll-Takers, I will pardon her in that she has thrice warned Kit Keene of danger.

"But I wish you to see if you cannot find her out, and also discover just how and when this villain Mephisto and his band can be brought to the gallows.

"These outlaws have been holding a high hand of late, and as just now the Indians are quiet, I wish you to go upon this special duty."

"I will go, colonel, whenever you deem best."

"Take your time in preparing for the work, for you must go wholly prepared.

"I will allow you a detail of a sergeant and as many men as you need, with those of your scouts you wish to take with you."

"Thank you, Colonel Royston, but I think it hardly wise to let the Toll-Takers know that we are on the search for them.

"If Surgeon Frank Powell and Texas Jack, from Fort L— were here, I would wish to have them go along with me, for you know their reputation as scouts."

"Well indeed; and you would make a strong trio; but, I do not know that I could get Surgeon Powell, and I would dislike to ask for Texas Jack from Fort L—."

"Well, colonel, I have a friend here now, and no better ally can I ask. We will go together."

"I believe you are right, Cody, in not taking a force with you. But, who is your friend?"

"Wild Bill, sir."

"The very man! and you two can accomplish wonders," said the colonel with enthusiasm.

Three days after, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill had started upon their perilous mission, and their trail first led them to Glory Hallelujah City.

CHAPTER VI.

HALLELUJAH CITY.

THE Mecca toward which Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were wending their way, when they so fortunately and strangely made the acquaintance of the solitary dweller in the cabin on the mountain spur, who answered to the name of the Gentleman in Broadcloth, was more unique than even the mining-towns of the Far West are wont to be.

Glory Hallelujah City was the remarkable name that the settlement rejoiced in, and it centered upon the ruins of an old fort situated upon a spur which commanded a fine view of the valley on either side, with a river in front and a lofty mountain range beyond.

The place centered upon the old fort for the reason that just there had been erected the tavern known as Kate's Kitchen, with an annex upon one side of the Overland coach stables, for Hallelujah City was the terminus of a branch line, and upon the other side of the "hotel" was the Queen of Hearts Saloon.

The tavern was an eating-house, with a wing on either side where were the rooms of those who lodged there through force of circumstances.

Along the front was a piazza, so called, though it was a shed roof and had Mother Earth for flooring.

Here were benches for loungers, and they were generally occupied.

There was a small second floor, containing a few choice rooms over one wing, and here the landlady had her quarters, for the host was a hostess.

"Lady Kate" was this hostess's name, and that she was a lady born and bred there could be no doubt.

She had come to the tavern in male attire one night, two years before, and had asked to see the landlord, Frank Fenwick, a gambler, and a dashing fellow, withal.

Not known to be a woman, she had gone up to the landlord's room, and, soon after, a shot was heard, and those who ran to the room found Frank Fenwick dead upon the floor. To the amazed crowd the pretended boy said:

"I am a woman. That man wronged me beyond forgiveness, and I tracked him here. In the sight of Heaven I was his wife. Do with me as you will, for I am ready to face death!"

The miners stood aghast, until one said:

"If you is satisfied, miss, we is, and as you was Frank's wife, jist take the tavern for yer own and run it ter suit yerself."

The woman was beautiful in face and form, with great dark eyes, hair of red-gold hue, and a look to melt an iron heart; hence it was not strange that the rude men before her bowed down in admiration to her.

Frank Fenwick was buried that afternoon, and the next day Kate Fenwick took charge. Thereafter the hotel became known as Kate's Kitchen, and no one ever went hungry from its doors.

She took Fenwick's two rooms, and observers were wont to say that often she was seen standing at the window gazing down upon the little cemetery a half-mile away on the river-bank, where was the grave of her husband.

Some said that Fenwick had killed himself at sight of his wife, and others that she had shot him; but, certain it was that she was never asked for the truth of the affair.

She dressed well, had several good saddle-horses in the stable, and was a superb rider, while about her waist was always strapped a belt of arms, and, as she was known to be a dead-shot, no miner or camp ruffian had been tempted thus far to force her to use her weapons.

The only other female in Hallelujah City was, by a strange coincidence, a beautiful one, and also the proprietress of an establishment equally as popular as was Kate's Kitchen.

This was the Queen of Hearts Saloon, which had been opened by a gambler who had arrived at the camps one day and at once had the shanty erected in which he combined gambling-tables and a bar.

Soon after his arrival he built a house for himself on the hill behind the tavern, and, to the surprise of all, the coach one day set down at Kate's Kitchen a young girl whom Gambler Gray met and introduced to Kate Fenwick as his wife.

On Sunday night, some weeks after her arrival, as Gray was going home from his saloon, carrying a large sum of money with him, he was shot down and robbed; but he managed to reach his home and tell his story, and after one week of mourning, the gambling-den was opened by the Queen of Hearts, Louise Gray, who was also known in Hallelujah City as Lady Lou.

Between Lady Kate and Lady Lou there seemed to be a stronger bond of friendship than the mere fact that they were the only females in Hallelujah City warranted. Often were they together, and the respect shown them was marked.

The men of Hallelujah City storekeepers, Overland hangers-on, camp idlers and miners, were not a community to be proud of.

Gambling was the principal amusement, with drinking and life-taking as side-shows.

The mines panned out well, gold-dust circulated freely, and the camps could boast, all told, some six hundred souls, scattered about within a radius of half a dozen miles.

There were Americans, Mexicans and half-breeds from California and New Mexico, a few Indians, a score of Chinese and an equal number of negroes, and among the first named were representatives from every State and Territory in the Union.

Then there were some adopted citizens of our great republic, among them being English, Irish, Scotch, French, Spanish, Germans and Canadians.

With such a mixture it is not to be wondered at that Bandbox Bill had once remarked in public that Devil's Den would be a far more appropriate name for the settlement than was that of Hallelujah City.

That, too, there was a villain to every honest man in the community goes without saying, and this same desperado element made itself felt on all occasions.

That the graveyard, picturesquely situated upon the river-bank and known as the "Bone Garden," had planted there almost daily some human exotics, is not to be wondered at, while it was a cause of surprise to a stranger going there to find two of the graves overgrown with wild flowers, and having headboards upon which had been neatly cut the names of those who there slept their last sleep.

These graves were where rested the remains of Gambler Gray and Frank Fenwick.

Into this strange settlement, Glory Hallelujah City, it was that Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill rode that afternoon after their adventure on the trail which had so nearly ended their lives.

CHAPTER VII.

A TRIO OF MYSTERIES.

THE two famous scouts were too striking in their appearance and general make-up to go unnoticed, even in Hallelujah City.

They were dressed in a picturesque frontier costume, top-boots and sombrero, and carried a repeating-rifle each slung at their saddle-horns, while the never-omitted belt-of-arms encircled their waists.

They wore their hair long, and were wont to keep their cheeks clean-shaven, which gave them a very neat appearance.

Then they were splendidly mounted, and had with them on their saddles their blankets and camping outfit for nights to be spent on the trail.

The loungers about Kate's Kitchen eyed them as they rode up, and when they were met by Lady Kate, who welcomed them with a smile and pleasant word, they felt that their lot might have been cast in a far worse place than the tavern of Hallelujah City.

They registered their names as "Will Cody" and "James Hikok," their real names, in fact, and were glad to see that no one seemed to know them.

Lady Kate gave them a room upon the upper floor, reserved for favored guests, and set them down to a supper which they were more than pleased with.

"Lady Kate, does yer know them two pilgrims as yer is so sweet on?" asked a villainous-faced man, as the landlady returned after showing her guests to the supper-table.

"They register as Cody and Hikok, Buzz Saw Bill was the quiet reply of the woman, who felt that the man was plotting mischief—something he was noted for in the camps.

His general appearance was against him, for there was a hideous scar upon his face which had been made by his falling upon a buzz saw, he said, when working in a lumber-mill, and hence his sobriquet, of which he seemed to be proud.

"Wail, they is Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill, Government scouts, and they is here fer no good."

"I have heard of the men you name as wonderful specimens of manhood. Are you sure you are not mistaken, Buzz Saw?"

"No, Lady Kate, for I knows 'em, and they is here sart'in to nip some poor fellow."

"I guess the man they nip, as you call it, will not be missed, Buzz Saw," was the quiet response, and Lady Kate turned to Lady Lou, who just then entered, and the two really beautiful women went in to supper.

"Buffalo, who is that woman?" asked Wild Bill, quickly, as the two sat down near the scouts.

"One is our landlady, Bill, but the other I do not know."

"I have seen her somewhere before," and Wild Bill began to try and recall when and where he had seen the fair gambler.

Having told Louise Gray what Buzz Saw had said of the scouts, Kate Fenwick seemed anxious to discover more about them and their coming to the mining-camps, so said:

"Gentlemen, as you said you expected to be my guests for some little time, permit me to present my friend, Mrs. Gray—better known here as Lady Lou."

The scouts bowed, and Buffalo Bill in his pleasant way said:

"Yes, we are taking a jaunt through the mountains and camps for a few weeks, and finding your hotel such a good one, we will hardly be tempted to leave it until we have to do so."

"You will find Hallelujah City a very rough place," remarked Lady Lou.

"Judging from the only two acquaintances we have made here, I beg to differ with you," was Buffalo Bill's gallant response.

"Thank you, but we are the only representatives of our sex here. You will have to deal with the wild element of a very tough camp, so be upon your guard."

"We are not wholly strangers to the border, but thank you for your kind warning. I may add, we had another warning on our way here."

"How so, may I ask?" and both women seemed interested.

Wild Bill had remained quiet, but was attentive while Buffalo Bill told the story of their being ambushed and saved by two wonderful shots at long range by the mysterious man living alone upon the mountain spur.

"Who is this Unknown Dead Shot, miss?" suddenly asked Wild Bill.

"Well, he is, as you say, unknown; but we call him here the Bravo in Broadcloth, while he is also known as Bandbox Bill, the Gentleman in Black, and the name you just spoke of—the Unknown Dead Shot."

"Then he has tried his aim before in these parts, miss?"

"Yes, a number of times."

"What does he do?"

"No one knows."

"He has money in plenty, pays liberally for all he gets, and plays cards often, paying promptly when he loses, though he is often successful, as Lady Lou here knows, for my friend is the owner of the Queen of Hearts Gambling Saloon."

"Yes; he is a bold, fearless player, and yet seems to know all that is going on about him the while."

"The man is a mystery to me, and I am sure he is here for some purpose that he keeps to himself," Lady Lou remarked.

The scouts were becoming more and more interested in the Bravo in Broadcloth, and Buffalo Bill told of his having just completed a coffin when they rode up.

"Then some man's doom is sealed for this night, for the Bravo always gives fair notice to his victims, if I may so call the men he kills, and brings his coffin to bury him in."

"He's a liberal sort of pilgrim, to say the least of him," Wild Bill said.

Supper was now finished, and Lady Lou invited the strangers to call at the Queen of Hearts during the evening, and they promised to be there, as they had told the Bravo in Broadcloth they would meet him there.

Lighting their cigars, the two scouts sat down in front of the hotel, while they became objects of interest to the half a hundred loungers gathered there, as Buzz Saw Bill had already spread it about who they were.

They were too well-known by reputation not to create an excitement in Hallelujah City, and, wondering what could be their mission there, those among the camp-dwellers who had guilty consciences for crimes committed, began to feel very uneasy at the presence in their midst of two men whose names were a terror along the border.

That some one had recognized them the scouts soon discovered; but, though they had hoped to remain unknown, they had hardly expected to do so.

They had come to that mining-camp as the starting-point for the duty they had to perform, in solving the mystery of the Woman in Black who had warned Kit Keene's stage of danger, and to strike the track of the Toll-Takers of the Trails, whom they hoped to run to earth.

They had already discovered in the Bravo in Broadcloth, Lady Lou and Lady Kate, a trio of mysteries they had been unprepared for in that wild community, and Wild Bill remarked, very properly:

"Buffalo, it will take a hand full of trumps to win the game we have got to play in these parts."

"Bill, you are right; but, somehow, I believe we have struck the head-center of the Toll-Takers right here."

"Maybe; but, let us go in and take a squint at the Queen of Hearts's layout."

And the two scouts walked over to the saloon of the fair gambler.

CHAPTER VIII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

"It's no use, Jack," for her horse outfoots ours," said one of two horsemen, drawing rein after a long, hard run after a woman on horseback of whom they had been in pursuit.

In the speaker no one would have recognized Surgeon Frank Powell, of the United States Army, so completely was he metamorphosed.

His dark complexion had been stained to the hue of an Indian's skin, and his black hair had been braided with beads and feathers, while a dress of gorgeous feathers covered his head and fell down to his waist.

From head to foot he was in the costume of a Sioux chief, red blanket and all, and his roan was equipped with an Indian saddle and bridle.

That a white man could be thus transformed to all appearances into an Indian one would hardly believe without seeing.

His companion was Texas Jack, but no one would have even suspected the fact, for he wore a wig of white hair, concealed under a fox-skin cap except the locks that hung down his back.

He had shaved off his mustache, and his beard, a week's growth, gave him a grizzly appearance, while his eyes were concealed under a pair of iron-rimmed spectacles with plain glasses in them.

His attire was buckskin leggings, a blanket hunting-shirt, moccasins, and his foxskin cap with three long bushy tails waving about his head with every motion.

He looked the old trapper of the mountains to perfection, and no one would have suspected that he had not passed his three-score years.

His horse was a wiry, raw-boned bay, looking very rough, but with fine points which a closer study would reveal, while his trappings were as ancient as the rider looked.

That the two disguises would pass muster the adventurers had proven by deceiving Surgeon Powell's brother officers, who were allowed to behold them in their "make up."

They had been several days upon the trail,

when they had suddenly discovered, upon nearing the Haunted Valley, a horse and rider ahead of them and regarding them attentively.

As they pushed forward more rapidly Jack called out:

"Doc, it's the Woman in Black."

"Your sable ghost?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if she can outrun our horses I'll think she really has wings to aid her."

"Come!"

The two started forward at a run, and the woman quickened her pace, after glancing over her shoulder an instant.

They were in a valley, and the trail was a good one, so the horses fairly flew along.

The shadows of night were falling, and it seemed a weird sight to behold the woman ahead of them in that place.

She was mounted upon a horse as black as night, and her habit was black also, while a sable veil floated behind her.

When she had turned her face it was seen to be very white.

What could she be there for, and who was she?

"We must catch her, Texas Jack."

"If we can, Doc."

So on the horses of the disguised scouts were urged, but though they were fairly flying along, they were losing ground rapidly.

"Doc, she is leaving us as you see."

"Yes," and the disguised Surgeon Scout urged on his splendid roan.

The bay of Texas Jack kept neck and neck with him, however, and the pace was kept up at the same tremendous speed for over a mile.

The shadows had deepened, and soon the Woman in Black had disappeared in the distance and gloom, never having seemed to urge her horse.

Then it was that Surgeon Powell uttered the words that opened this chapter:

"It's no use, Jack, for her horse outfoots ours!"

"Well, Pard Doc, what do you make of her?"

"I don't know about her; but I do know that she has a horse I would like to own. The animal seemed to hardly stretch himself out for a run and yet dropped our good horses easily, and we know what they can do."

"Yes, but do you hear any hoof-falls?"

"No, for she has stopped running."

"When I saw her before, the horse she rode over rocky ground made no sound."

"Then the horse is a ghost, too," decided Powell, with a laugh.

"I confess to being a trifle superstitious, Doc, for I do not see how a man can be a frontiersman and not become so."

"I was a sailor when a lad, for a short while, and I became superstitious then, and dwelling alone in the mountains and prairies has made me more so."

"You surely do not believe that woman is not flesh and blood, Jack?"

"Reason tells me she is, and yet she is a mystery, as is her horse."

"Well, we must solve the mystery—Hello!" and Surgeon Powell drew rein, for upon the left of the trail was a large, smooth rock, and upon it, written in letters of fire, they read:

"There is an ambush a mile ahead of you. Four men follow your trail. You are known to have left Fort L—to hunt down the Toll-Takers."

"Be warned!"

"Jack!"

"Yes, Doc."

"This is strange."

"You bet it is."

"It is written with phosphorus upon this rock, as you see."

"I know phosphorus shines like fire, doctor, for I have often seen it; but who wrote it?"

"The woman, I guess. See, it grows brighter as the darkness increases."

"Yes."

"Well, we will not have whoever wrote it suffer from warning us, so I'll rub it out."

"And then?"

"Just ambush the gentlemen upon our trail."

"All right, Doc."

"Say, Jack, we are not keeping to our plan."

"How so?"

"You forget that I am Red Chief, as I do that you are Snow Hair."

"Ah yes; we must stick to our new names, Red Chief," answered Jack.

They dismounted and rubbed the tell-tale warning off the rocks.

Then they led their horses back in the timber a short distance and took up a position behind the rock, their rifles ready.

In a few moments they heard footfalls; then voices, and four horsemen appeared in sight.

As they drew rein, not thirty paces from the two ambushed men, one of the riders said:

"I tell you I believe they turned off the trail to camp."

"No. Texas Jack knows this country and would go on to the spring ahead to camp," replied the other.

"Well, we better go back to where we lost

their trail when darkness came on, and be ready to continue at dawn."

"They may travel all night, and so pass through the valley."

"Not they, for they are in no hurry, so would camp."

"Besides, word went on that they had left the fort, so they will be ambushed in the valley by the chief if we miss them."

"Well, we had better not miss them, pards, for the chief sent us word that they had started upon our trail, Powell, the Surgeon Scout, and Texas Jack, disguised as an Indian and an old trapper, and that we were to strike their trail and do for them."

"Now, here we are in our own range, and we have not overtaken them."

"Because they are as cunning as red-skins, and have covered up their trail."

"Well, what is to be done?"

"Return to the spot where we lost their trail, and camp until morning."

With this the four men turned and rode away.

"Snow Hair?"

"Yes, Red Chief."

"That Woman in Black is our guardian angel."

"You bet she is; but, what is to be done?"

"I don't know; let us think," was the low response.

CHAPTER IX.

PARDS AT THE QUEEN OF HEARTS.

JUST as Indians sit in silence and plot and plan, the two friends, who had so fortunately escaped from between two fires, remained for some time, their thoughts busy with their situation.

At last Surgeon Powell said, in a low tone:

"Jack!"

"Yes."

"There is a spy at Fort L—"

"So I was thinking."

"I am sure of it, for our departure was known and word sent at once to the chief of the Toll-Takers, whoever he is."

"You are on the right trail, pard."

"This chief there sent word to some squad of his band to track us and bury us."

"Sure."

"He also decided to have others ambush us."

"And they are ahead."

"Yes, and the woman knew all about it and warned us."

"Bless her sweet soul!"

"Now, one of those men spoke your name, for he said that Texas Jack knew this country."

"So he did; but I know very little about it."

"Well, his remark showed that our disguises are known to the Toll-Takers, so some one at the fort is a spy for the outlaw chief and sent him word."

"But who is the spy?"

"I cannot guess."

"Only half a dozen officers knew of our going, and in these costumes."

"Only those that we knew of; but if there is a spy there, and there surely is, he was on the watch."

"Now, he has allies, for he sent word to the chief, that is evident, and we came by easy rides this far."

"Then we are in close quarters."

"If we stay here, yes."

"If we stay?"

"Yes, but we must not stay."

"Give up the work, then?"

"I thought you knew me better than that, Jack."

"No, you are a bulldog to hold on; but what do you mean?"

"We must get out of this valley now."

"Ahead of here, as you know, is a stream. We can follow it down to a place where we can cover up our tracks when we leave it."

"Then we must ride all night, and ride fast, too, and go down into the mining-country, say about Hallelujah Camp, and rest there awhile."

"Then we can return this way in different disguises and see what we can discover."

"You have a great head, Doc."

"Red Chief, if you please."

"Yes; well, Red Chief, I am ready, so let us move."

They returned to their horses and mounting rode back into the trail and then on to the stream which both of them knew of, having been in the valley before.

Down this they rode, keeping in the water until they came to where they could ride out over the low banks.

So on through the night, covering their trail as best they could, the two friends made their way, and when the dawn came they were many miles from the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

"If they can follow our trail by day as fast as we traveled last night, Jack, they are welcome to do so."

"Now let us seek a camping-place, have breakfast and get a few hours' rest."

This they did, and it was nearly noon when they again resumed their way.

The lights of Hallelujah City came in sight an hour after dark. They sought Kate's Kitchen, had a old supper, and then sauntered into the saloon of the Queen of Hearts.

In his character of Red Chief, Surgeon Powell was erect, silent and watchful, though apparently indifferent, while Texas Jack with a stoop in his walk and a shuffling gait led the way to a seat near the door.

They were observed by a few of those near them and noted as strangers; but there seemed to be some cause of excitement on hand which the two did not discover.

In the upper end of the saloon, upon a raised seat, sat Lady Lou. She was dealing faro on a rude table, evidently of home manufacture.

Her deft fingers handled the cards skillfully, and the expression of her beautiful face never changed whether the cards went for or against her.

A large group was about the faro-table, and then there was a roulette-stand, a dice-box, and a number of stands at which players were congregated.

One of the heaviest players at the faro-table was a man who looked every inch a villain.

He was six feet in height, had great broad shoulders, a bearded face, and wore his hair long, for it hung down his back to his belt.

His eyes were small and keen as an eagle's, and in the belt about his waist were four revolvers, two in front and one on either hip.

He was a good card-player, seldom losing, and had frightened off every one from playing with him except Lady Lou, who never flinched, no matter how high the stakes nor how heavy her loss.

Seated by the side of Lady Lou was the fair landlady of the tavern. She was watching the game with considerable interest, and from which every one had drawn out except the large gambler, who was known in the mines as Six-Shooter Sam, perhaps on account of his revolvers, and maybe because no one knew his real name, which he had taken good care not to mention.

Six-Shooter Sam was a man to be feared, for added to great physical strength was his deadly aim, desperate character and merciless nature. He never spared friend or foe, and many of the better spirits of the camps had longed to see the desperado meet his match or his doom.

He had often tried to get the Bravo in Broadcloth into a game with him, but that personage declined to play, for some reason, up to that very day, when he had sent word in to Six-Shooter Sam that he would be at the Queen of Hearts Saloon that night and play a two-handed game with him.

How the desperado took this message none knew; but certain it was that he went to the saloon, accompanied by a dozen of his boon companions, who were of like caliber as himself.

Texas Jack had asked a miner near him who the man was, and the account of him was about what I have just made known to the reader.

"But where is this Bravo in Broadcloth who sent him their challenge, Pard Stranger?" asked Jack.

"He hain't arriv' yit; but he'll be heur, and it w'u'dn't surprise me of thet game he said he would play were not played with keards."

"As how, pard?" innocently asked Texas Jack, gazing at his informant curiously through his spectacles, while the disguised surgeon seemed not to hear a word that was being said.

"Waal, ther Bravo in Broadcloth are a trifle mysterious in his ways, and when he sends a invitation it means suthin'."

"Who is this Bravo in Broadcloth, pard?"

"Ther Lord on'y knows, stranger, fer I don't. He come here some months ago and camped out up in the mountings, and thar lives alone by hisself."

"He dresses like a parson at a weddin', and he has a contract fer killin' sart'in folks, and he does it prime; but ef he and Six-Shooter Sam meets, thar'll be big sport this night."

"I guesses so, pard," said Texas Jack, talking in a quavering, squeaking voice like an old man, and skillfully using the border dialect.

"Pard, thar is two gents I has heerd much of, and maybe yer knows 'em—thar, yer kin see 'em now as ther crowd about ther Queen o' Hearts parts a leetle."

"Buffalo Bill!" and Texas Jack started in spite of his nerve.

"You knows 'em, then?"

"I has seen 'em, pard, ef yer means Buff'ler Bill and Wild Bill yonder," and Texas Jack glanced toward the surgeon, whose eyes had fallen upon their two friends at the same instant.

"They comed inter town ter-day, and I guesses they knows what they is here fer, and somebody else will find out, too; but listen! fer Six-Shooter Sam are a-shoutin', and he's mad when he talks loud," and the deep voice of the desperado was heard above the noise in the large saloon, ringing out in earnest tones.

CHAPTER X.

THE UNKNOWN APPEARS.

SIX-SHOOTER SAM was in luck, for he had been winning steadily from the bank.

The Queen of Hearts showed no annoyance at his doing so, counted out his winnings with firm hands and laid them before him, and went on dealing from the little tin box without any sign of nervousness.

At last the man said, in his rude, boisterous manner:

"I'll let up, Queen, fer I hates ter take money from a woman."

"Oh, no; if you enjoy the game pray keep on without consulting my pleasure," said Lady Lou, quietly.

"If I only had a man ter play with I'd be glad; but ther durned gerloots o' this town is sich cowards they is afeerd ter lose a leetle dust at keards."

"Well, pard, as I am not from Hallelujah City I am not afraid to risk a little gold-dust in a game with you," said Wild Bill.

All eyes turned upon the scout, who stood as though unconscious of the gaze his words brought upon him.

Calm, a perfect specimen of splendid manhood, he coolly eyed the astonished desperado, who, as soon as he could decide that his challenge had been accepted said in his rough way:

"You are a stranger in this town?"

"I am."

"I guesses yer must be ter hev ther cheek ter offer to tackle me at keards."

"Are you so dangerous, then?"

"Are I dangerous? Waal, I sees yer does not know me."

"No; but I hope to have that honor."

"I are Six-Shooter Sam."

The desperado made the announcement with the air of a man who expected to see the one who did not know him flinch at the information.

Wild Bill smiled and said:

"It's a real cute name; but I never heard of you before, pard."

"Never heard o' me?"

"No; where are you from?"

"Hallelujah City, and ther boss o' ther town."

"I can hardly believe that."

And Wild Bill showed no excitement, whatever.

"Waal, why can't yer believe it?"

"Because, though a stranger here, I have seen some pretty square-looking men around who don't look as though they served under a master."

Six-Shooter Sam laughed loudly. He seemed to enjoy urging Wild Bill on, as a cat plays with a mouse before destroying it.

"Waal, I is master in Hallelujah, and I says so, and no man denies it unless he calls me a liar."

"Well, I cannot speak for the people here; but it seems to me that if I lived in Hallelujah, I would not wear a yoke for any man."

"Pard, what might your name be?"

"I am often called Wild Bill."

All saw the start the bully gave. His dark face paled quickly, while he glanced about him, catching the eyes of his special pals.

"Does yer mean that yer is Wild Bill Hikok, ther scout?"

"Yes."

Six-Shooter Sam seemed ill at ease, and in vain tried to hide it; but he had been leading the conversation, intending to spring a mine in the end which would add more luster of a crimson hue to his name.

He felt that he could not now afford to drop the stranger then and there without being thought a coward.

So, after another quick glance over the crowd, to see that his gang were all present, he said:

"Waal, Wild Bill, yer may be ther King Bee up whar you lives, but in Hallelujah City I are ther boss, and no man dare say I hain't."

Wild Bill had sought no quarrel with the man. He had watched his playing with the Queen of Hearts, and had decided to "chip in" and prevent the woman from losing more money by asking the desperado to play with him.

He read the big ruffian at a glance, and, fond of a game of cards, he was anxious to win from the man and avenge the losses of Lady Lou.

If Six-Shooter Sam sought a quarrel with him that would be the bully's own lookout and he must take the consequences, and Wild Bill mentally calculated that if the desperado forced him to kill him the loss would not be deeply felt in Hallelujah City.

Before he could reply to the man's direct dare to him to say he did not believe he was the "boss" of the camps, the door of the saloon swung open and as all beheld who entered, a hum of voices ran around the room, and in a chorus the name was spoken:

"The Bravo in Broadcloth!"

It was the Bravo in Broadcloth who entered! Upon one shoulder he carried a coffin, and all present felt that he had come to the saloon to find an occupant for the uncanny "overcoat."

He walked straight toward the platform, on which sat the Queen of Hearts, with Kate Fenwick by her side, and before which were Six-Shooter Sam, Wild Bill, and the immediate group about them.

A deathlike silence fell upon the throng at sight of the Bravo in Black, carrying his coffin,

and brave as were most of those present they shuddered at the sight.

The coming of the mysterious man at once turned the attention of all from the threatened war between the desperado and Wild Bill, and the latter whispered to Buffalo Bill:

"Our mountain pard has arrived, Buffalo."

"Yes, and he's brought his burying-box with him, which means business," was the answer.

The crowd gave way as the mysterious man advanced. All seemed to realize that he had come upon a special mission.

Coolly placing the coffin on the faro-table, the Bravo in Broadcloth raised his hat politely to the Queen of Hearts and Lady Kate; then turning quickly upon the desperado, the Bravo in Broadcloth covered him with a revolver, which no one saw him draw, while he said sternly:

"Six-Shooter Sam, I brought that coffin for you!"

CHAPTER XI.

A SECRET POWER.

THE change was so sudden, from the bullying manner of the desperado, who seemed proud of his name and reputation and the terror he caused many to feel, to the coming in of the Bravo in Broadcloth, that it was a relief to all present, with perhaps the exception of the six-shooter braggart himself.

Excitement ran high, and yet it was suppressed, and all eyes were turned upon the man from the mountains, who had brought such a weird gift to the desperado.

Wild Bill merely stepped back, as though he readily understood that there was no further cause for quarrel between the bully and himself.

The Bravo looked strangely handsome, but dangerous.

His suit of black fitted him well. It was buttoned up close to his throat, giving him a clerical look, while his black, broad-brimmed sombrero was turned up upon the left side, and caught there by a small star of black enamel.

He wore no arms that were visible, and yet he had suddenly leveled a short revolver, but of large caliber, at the intended occupant of the coffin.

The coffin was now seen to have been well-made, stained black, and upon the lid in red letters those near enough read:

"SIX-SHOOTER SAM,

"Killed August 1st, 18—."

It was certainly very suggestive, for the day was the first of August, and it was only a couple of hours to midnight when the second day of the month would be ushered in.

Lady Lou and the fair landlady of Kate's Kitchen were too familiar with scenes of death, which were almost of a daily occurrence, to show any excitement, and they calmly awaited the ordeal that must come, while the crowd, with quick unanimity, separated on either side and left the space behind the Bravo and the bully open for flying bullets.

The bluster of the desperado at once was checked by the threatening words of the Man in Black. He had often said in public that the Bravo in Broadcloth was an overrated man, and that he wished a chance at him some day, either with cards, knives or revolvers.

The fact was, he was jealous of the reputation which the mysterious mountaineer had gained, and he hoped for a chance to remove his rival—for as such he looked upon him.

Several times he had challenged the Bravo for a game of cards, or to shoot with him for a money prize, but the reply had always been:

"Some day, Six-Shooter Sam, when I feel in the humor for a game with you, I'll let you know, and I'll give you fair warning."

The day before the arrival of the two scouts in Hallelujah City the Bravo had ridden over to the cabin of the desperado, and finding him out, had pinned a note on the door, which read as follows:

"Will be glad to play a game with Six-Shooter Sam to-morrow night at the Queen of Hearts Saloon."

"BANDBOX BILL."

"The Bravo in Broadcloth."

That any other game than one of cards was intended by the Bravo, Sam had not the remotest idea; but he hinted to a few of his intimates that he wished them to be on hand, and added that, after he had won a handsome sum of money from his adversary, he would pick a quarrel with him.

Upon this promise his friends had gone there, feeling sure of sport, as they looked upon an encounter which they were not engaged in.

When, therefore, the Bravo entered, bearing a coffin, a hush fell upon all.

Several times before he had given warning of his coming, to certain wild characters in the camps, and he had never failed to keep his word, and more, a death was certain to follow his arrival, until, as Texas Jack's informant had said, he seemed to have a "contract" for taking off some of the lawless spirits of the mines.

"That's him! That's the Man in Broadcloth!" said Texas Jack's informant as the Bravo entered, and they pressed forward to get a nearer

view, the scout and the disguised surgeon, for when they saw Six-Shooter Sam trying to pick a quarrel with Wild Bill, knowing the nature of Hikok, they had gained a nearer point of observation and action, should it become necessary to take a hand in to protect the Two Bills.

So Sam saw the entrance of the Bravo, as the others did, and beheld the grim box he carried; but he was not prepared for such quick work of a hostile nature, as the Bravo performed, so was taken unawares.

He was covered with a revolver, which looked into his eyes not three feet away, and his own weapons, four splendid shooting-irons, were yet in his belt.

"Say, pard, I hain't no actor, to play jokes on, for I don't take kindly to funny business," growled the desperado.

"I certainly fail to see any joke in my telling you that I have brought a coffin for you, Six-Shooter Sam," was the reply in the deep, stern voice of the Bravo.

"Does yer mean it?"

"I do, for I left you a note on your door that I would be here to-night to have a game with you."

"And are *this* the game?"

"No, I merely intend to disarm you now, and then give you my commands, which you are to obey."

"Durned ef I do!"

"That we shall see," and the Bravo quickly unbuckled the belt of arms around the desperado's waist, still keeping him covered with his revolver.

"Pards, hain't I no right here, thet yer sees me disarmed?" cried the bully.

As his eyes met those of several of his pals, they made a step forward, when Wild Bill called out:

"Hold on, there! This is a case of man to man, so the one who chips in dies with his boots on!"

This caused the bully's immediate friends to drop back, and the Bravo said, politely:

"Thank you, sir; but I will soon settle this affair!"

Raising his voice, he called out:

"Who of you here have lost money in a game of cards with this man?"

"Lots of us has lost, but not lately, though Lady Lou got roped in fer a cool fifteen hundred to-night."

"Is that so, Lady Lou?"

"Yes, Mr. Bandbox Bill, it is."

"At faro?"

"Yes."

"What cards did you use?"

"My own pack."

"Where do you leave them?"

"In the lock drawer of this table."

"Look and see if they have not been doctored."

She glanced rapidly over the cards and quickly said:

"Yes, they have been, and I noticed to-night that the smaller cards seemed to come out oftener than I could account for, and Six-Shooter Sam won on those."

"You are a stranger in Hallelujah City, sir?" and the Bravo turned upon Texas Jack.

"I be, yes."

"Please take the money from this man's pocket and give back to Lady Lou the amount he won from her to-night."

"I'll do it, pard," and Texas Jack did so in a very quick and skillful manner.

"It's cussed robbery, and you'll pay ther costs, young feller. Yer hear what I says," savagely cried the Six-Shooter.

"No, you'll pay the cost, for I'll return you your weapons now, and give you just one minute to leave this saloon, and one hour to get out of these mines."

"Will you go?"

"You'll give me back my weapons?"

"Yes, I so said."

"Then I stands here and has it out with you," was the dogged reply.

All gazed at the Bravo, and saw him step up to the desperado, holding out his weapons, while they heard him say a few words in a low tone. What he said no ear caught other than the one for which they were spoken, and the effect upon Sam was startling, for he turned to an ashen hue, staggered back as though dealt a blow, and gasped forth, as though pleadingly:

"My God! yes, I'll go! I'll go!"

"Here are your weapons, sir!" and the voice of the Bravo in Broadcloth was terribly stern.

The desperado grasped the belt of revolvers, turned quickly and strode from the saloon.

No shout of derision followed his exit, for the crowd seemed to be too deeply moved to shout. All gazed in silence at Bandbox Bill, whose eyes followed the retreating form of the Six-Shooter ruffian until the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER XII.

BANDBOX BILL PLAYS ANOTHER TRUMP CARD.

THE moment the door closed upon the retreating form of Six-Shooter Sam, the Bravo's manner changed, and, turning to the beautiful faro-dealer, he said, pleasantly:

"Pardon my interruption, Lady Lou, but I have relieved you of a nuisance, to say the least,

and permit me to present the coffin as a souvenir of Six Shooter Sam."

"Thank you, sir! I will accept it, and appreciate it more than I did the man who so nearly became its occupant."

The Bravo bowed and was about to retire when Six-Shooter Sam's gang, feeling themselves disgraced by the action of their leader, and confident in numbers, for there were fully a dozen of them, decided to crush Bandbox Bill then and there.

So a self-appointed leader stepped forward and leveled his revolver full upon the Bravo, while he said:

"See here, pard, you hain't ter have things all yer own way."

"Well, what do you wish?" was the unmoved reply.

"Yer had ther game all yer own with a man as I didn't think had any back-down in him, so now you'll have ter crawfish, or turn up yer toes, for I has yer kivered."

No one had noticed what had become of the Bravo's revolver. It had disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared when he needed it.

Now it was not to be disputed that Giant Bruce, as the tough was called, on account of his great size and strength, certainly had the Unknown covered, and cheered at the sight, his comrades began to crowd around him, for to down the mysterious man would be to relieve Hallelujah City of one whom all the evil-doers feared greatly.

All felt for the Bravo, but he laughed lightly and said:

"Before you put on airs, Giant Bruce, be sure you have not a revolver-muzzle at the back of your own head."

The man wheeled quickly, and more sudden than a panther's leap was that of the Bravo, who, in a flash of time had driven his fist into the face of his big foe, seized him by the throat and hurled him, with an exhibition of seemingly more than mortal strength over a table and chairs into a corner of the room.

Then, in another second, he stood, a revolver now suddenly appearing in each hand, while he said in a tone of sarcasm:

"Do the friends of Giant Bruce wish to play this game to a finish?"

The gang were cowed somewhat by the sudden defeat of their leader, who was rising, half stunned, from the corner, and yet when he joined them again, furious as a mad bull, bleeding and in pain, war to the knife seemed to be the only alternative, when the voice of Buffalo Bill was heard:

"Men, don't crowd that gentleman, for he has friends here!" and the scout had drawn his weapons.

"So I say," and Wild Bill also stood at bay, stepping to the side of the Bravo.

"Me and Red Chief is with yer, pard," and Texas Jack and the supposed Indian chief stepped to the other side of the Bravo.

They certainly were a striking quintette as they stood at bay, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill on the right of the Bravo in Broadcloth, and Texas Jack and Surgeon Powell in disguise on the left, all with revolvers drawn, facing the wildest element in Hallelujah City.

Even the desperado band was struck by the determined look and general appearance of the five, and the Bravo said calmly:

"Giant Bruce, do you wish to play the game out?"

It was a critical moment, and the large crowd were as silent as the grave, wondering what the end would be.

But the Giant and his pals were no men to play against odds. They ran their eyes along the line of five—the supposed red-skin chief and the spectacled old man, then Bandbox Bill and the two scouts—and he decided to let the matter drop. So he answered, gruffly:

"I hain't no man to pick a quarrel in ther presence o' ladies, so I jist says hold yer keards until another time, Bandbox Bill, and we will see who holds trumps."

"I know now," was the cool response of the Bravo, and his words indicated that he wished the fracas to come then, backed as he was by such a quartette of allies.

This banter the Giant was compelled to answer, so he said:

"Who holds trumps?"

"I do."

"I doubts it."

"Shall I give you proof?"

"Does yer mean ter open fire here?"

"No."

"What does yer mean?"

"I will hand my weapons to Wild Bill here, while you place your belt of arms in the hands of that villain on your right; then step forward and let me say just half a dozen words to you."

"I'll do it!" and the Giant handed over his belt of arms.

The Bravo at once gave his two revolvers into Wild Bill's keeping and stepped up to the Giant and uttered a few low-spoken words.

The effect was magical, for the Giant shrunk back with a look of horror upon his brutal face, which at once turned to the hue of death.

"Now, sir, go!"

Sharply the command rung out, and Giant

Bruce seized his weapons, and, without a word, slunk out of the saloon as had the Six-Shooter before him.

All stood in amazement, gazing at the Bravo. What strange power held this mysterious man over these wild border dwellers, almost as savage as wolves in their nature?

That question no one could answer, and without any explanation Bandbox Bill turned to Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill and said in his courtly way:

"Gentlemen, you have canceled the debt you owed me, and I thank you. We will meet again."

Turning quickly toward Texas Jack and the pretended Indian chief, he continued:

"Your aid also I appreciate, and some day I will return the kindness. Good-night!"

He raised his black sombrero and walked from the saloon, while one of the gang of Six-Shooter Sam called out:

"I seen whar he keeps them guns o' his! They was up his coat-sleeves, pard; ef he isn't the devil hisself he is his lieutenant."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNKNOWN TIE.

WHEN Six-Shooter Sam left the Queen of Hearts Saloon, he mounted his horse, a splendid animal which he always kept not far away from him, and rode at a gallop down the valley to his cabin.

It was but a mile away and built against the mountain-side, just where there was a trail running around the cliff to the range above.

This trail the desperado pretended to keep closed up, so that no one could pass that way, but the obstruction was such that a minute's work could dash it all into the river forty feet below.

Just across the river was a flat which cut off approach from that direction, so that the cabin of the desperado was really approachable from the front only, and he could make a hasty retreat therefrom to the range above if it became necessary.

His cabin had but one room, and the door was made fast with two chains and padlocks.

Dismounting, he unlocked this door, and entering, soon had a candle lighted.

Then he stood like a great brute at bay, gnashing his teeth, his hands clinched tightly together and his face white as the bronze of his complexion would admit.

"My God! who is that man?" at last broke from his lips.

After awhile he became more calm and threw himself into a rude chair and began to think.

"I obeyed, yes, because what else could I do? Curse him—curse him! And I must leave here, for here he will come to see if I have gone."

"I will at once get my traps together and go. But where?"

"Bah! need I ask where?"

"Why, I will go where he can never come."

Springing to his feet he hastily began preparations to leave his cabin.

A couple of blankets, a large oilcloth, a storm-suit, some cooking utensils, bag of provisions, a few extra clothes and a rifle and ammunition were all his belongings.

These were made into two bundles and strapped upon a pack-saddle.

Then he went out and led a second horse from where he was staked out in the bottom, up to the door, and placed the pack saddle upon him.

His next move was to take from a secure hiding-place a belt of money, gold, bank-notes and dust.

This he strapped about his waist just as he heard the clatter of hoofs.

"My God, he is coming! The hour is up that he gave me."

And the voice of the ruffian trembled with excitement.

Then he said, quickly:

"Oh, that I had the nerve to kill him! But, no! I dare not do that—Ha! I know that signal!"

And a whistle was heard, repeated five times sharply.

Then up to the door dashed a horseman, and Giant Bruce sprang from his saddle, stooped at the low door and entered.

"Bruce, you here!"

"Yes."

And the Giant was very white-faced.

"You have come to deride me, I suppose?" sneered Six-Shooter Sam.

"Oh, no, for he knew me, too!"

"What?"

"I repeat it!"

"He recognized you?"

"Yes."

"As what?"

"Don't be a fool, Sam; for, though I did not know his power over you at first, I do now."

"What do you mean, Bruce?"

And each man had now dropped the border dialect in the excitement of the moment.

"I mean just what I say."

"And what do you say?"

"I say that but one thing could be said to you to make you sneak away like a whipped cur as you did, and that thing was said."

"And what was said?"

"The same that the Bravo said to me."

"Did you have trouble with him?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"I felt ashamed of your cowardice, so took up your quarrel."

"Well?"

"I had him fairly covered, and yet he tricked me by telling me to be first sure that a revolver-muzzle was not at the back of my head."

"And you looked to see?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I got a blow like the kick of a Government mule full in the face; then he grasped my throat and hurled me with a strength which mine is but child's play as compared to over a table and chairs into a corner."

"See, his fist bruised my face, and I was cut on the forehead by my fall."

"And then?"

"Oh! our gang took up the quarrel, when those two scouts, Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill chipped in on one side of him to back him up, and an old white-haired trapper, who had a Sioux chief for a pard, stepped up on the other side and ten revolvers were leveled as steady as cannon."

"Well?"

"Of course the boys caved, and I was told to step forward and hear what the gent had to say."

"What had he to say?"

"More than I wanted to hear."

"What was it?"

"The same that he said to you."

"I ask what that was?"

"See here, Sam, only certain words could be said to a man that would make him back down as we did."

"Those words were said, and they proved to me that you and I were in the same boat, though we did not know it."

"Well, you accuse me of being under that man's power?"

"I do."

"Name the power then?"

"It is unnamable, but you are obeying his command, for you are ready to go."

"Well; and you?"

"I would not let the sun rise upon me in Hallelujah City for a cool five thousand."

"Then go with me."

"Agreed! Which is your way?"

"North, south, east, west—anywhere."

"That suits me; but you have money?"

"Some little."

"And I a few hundreds."

"With your horse and outfit?"

"Yes. My extra animal will also carry your pack."

"Good! Come with me by my shanty."

"It is on the trail to his home."

"Yes, but we must go that way."

"Bruce!"

"Well?"

"You say we are in the same boat?"

"I do."

"Will you not tell me his power over you?"

"No more than you dare tell me what he said to you."

"We are two."

"Yes."

"He is but one?"

"Yes."

"You left him at the saloon?"

"I did."

"He comes by your cabin to his own?"

"He does."

"Well, why not meet him on the way?"

"My God! dare you do it?"

Six Shooter Sam shuddered at the sudden question, and his voice sunk to a whisper as he asked:

"Dare you?"

The Giant made no reply.

Thus the two stood in silence for full a minute, and Bruce said at last:

"Let us go."

"You did not answer my question, Bruce."

"You know that I can give no answer."

"How do I know it?"

"Because we are both under the same spell, and we dare not break it."

Six Shooter Sam made no response.

It was evident that neither man dared betray himself; and yet each tried to make the other do so.

That the same secret power influenced both they appeared to admit, yet neither dared say what that unknown influence was.

So they mounted their horses and rode away from the cabin where Six-Shooter Sam had long dwelt as a terror in the community.

Giant Bruce, though also dreaded, was not as brutal as the Six-Shooter ruffian, and his will had been led by the stronger one of the desperado.

The rest of the gang, some eight in number, were but tools in the hands of Sam, their chief, from fear, because of pay, and from other motives.

But Bandbox Bill's mysterious power had sent the leader and his lieutenant into exile.

They soon reached the cabin of the Giant. His packing up took but a few minutes, and his

belongings were strapped upon the back of Sam's led horse.

Then they moved down into the broad trail leading down the valley, and just there they suddenly halted, but only for an instant, for their spurs sunk into the flanks of their horses and they sped away at a run at what they saw.

What they beheld was the Bravo in Broadcloth seated upon his black horse on one side of the trail, silent, motionless as a statue, while the moon rising over the mountains cast its light full upon him.

He uttered no word, but his presence there urged them on as though Satan was at their heels.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DARK SUSPICION.

TAKING advantage of the excitement that followed the departure of Bandbox Bill, Texas Jack and Frank Powell quietly slipped out of the saloon and went along the trail for a talk.

"Well, Doc, that was a strange scene we got into."

"Strange, indeed, Jack. But, who is that man?"

"I give it up. He's a man clean through."

"Yes; he is a remarkable person. What eyes he had!"

"And what did he say to Six-Shooter Sam to make him skip as though the hangman was after him?"

"That puzzles me more than a little. But, more; he made the Giant make tracks in the same style."

"So he did, doctor. It's a mystery all around."

"Wonder if it could be a put-up job?"

"How do you mean, Jack?"

"Wonder if they are secretly pards, and they war playing a deep game for some reason?"

"I don't think so."

"That Six-Shooter looked dangerous to me, and I felt sure there was no back-down in him."

"So I thought."

"I kinder feel it was all a show."

"Yet he made him give up the money he had won."

"That's so."

"And if it was a show with the Six-Shooter, the same must be said of Giant Bruce."

"That is true."

"And he dealt the Giant a blow that was terrible, while he hurled him over that table in a manner I thought would break his neck or back."

"You are right."

"And the Giant's face was bruised and cut, while he looked in bad shape when he got up."

"So he did."

"Did you ever see such an exhibition of strength, Jack?"

"I never did, for though you are well supplied with strength, Doc, and I am considered a giant in that way, I know that both of us are no match for that man. Why, he tossed that Giant over in that corner as we could a six-year-old child."

"He certainly did; but, what a clever dodge that is of wearing his revolvers in his sleeves."

"Yes; I noticed that his sleeves looked a trifle large, but his arms fill them pretty well, and I do not see how he manages to keep his weapons there."

"He has some plan that is a good one, for they appeared and disappeared with wonderful quickness."

"I noticed that."

After a few minutes' silence Surgeon Powell added:

"Jack, I observed what I expect you failed to, in both of those men."

"The desperadoes?"

"Yes."

"What was it, Doc?"

"Why, they both turned deadly pale when that mysterious Man in Black uttered the words which set them going as they did."

"Did they?"

"They did, and there was no feigned fear in the expressions on their faces. Whatever he said certainly amazed and frightened them both."

"I guess I am wrong about there being an understanding between them then."

"I am sure that you are; but, Jack, what a surprise for us to run upon Buffalo Bill and Hikok here!"

"Now, wasn't it, Doc? And they didn't know us, either!"

"Oh, no; our disguises are too good for that, and I think it best that we do not make ourselves known. We may be of help to the Two Bills, for they have come here on some special mission, Jack."

"Perhaps the same that we are on."

"Yes, and we can watch them pretty close and get the joke on them in the end by their not knowing us."

"I guess they are on a secret trail, Doc, for those Two Bills have not come to Hallelujah City for sport."

"No, and they seemed to be friendly with the Bravo, for he said their handling him up to-night canceled some debt they owed him."

"So he did, as I recall now. But what a team those Three Bills would be if all pulled together!"

"Three Bills?"

"Yes, Bandbox Bill, you know."

"Ah, yes, they would indeed be a trio to tie to."

"And with Red Chief and old Snow Hair, the trapper, in reserve, we could make it lively for the outlaws of Hallelujah," and Texas Jack laughed.

"Yes, we could get up a picnic here, Jack; but what do you think of those two ladies?"

"Doc, ain't they beauties?"

"They certainly are. Why they are here I cannot understand."

"Nor I. There is more mystery in this town than in a jugglers' show."

"You are right, for the Bravo is a mystery, that pretty pair of women are another, the power Bandbox Bill held over those two desperadoes is another, and why Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill are here is another puzzle to solve."

"And we are something of a riddle in our present make-up, Doc, eh?"

"Yes, and let those read us who can. But, Jack?"

"Well, pard?"

"Did you hear what that man who sat near us to-night hinted about the Bravo?"

"No."

"Well, I heard him say, in a low tone to a comrade, that the belief was gaining ground in the mines that Bandbox Bill was the secret chief or spy, of the Toll-Takers of the Trail."

"You don't say so!" returned Texas Jack, in surprise.

"That is what I heard him say, and though I may wrong him, I begin to be suspicious of him."

"Then he may be the very man whose trail we are to take?"

"Perhaps; but we must lay low and find out, for I believe that this is the spot to pick up the trails which will lead to the finding of the Toll-Takers."

"You don't miss the target often, doctor."

"I am the more convinced of it from seeing Wild Bill and Cody here."

"Well, Doc, we are here too, and we will keep our eyes open, for that dark suspicion against this Bandbox Bill is worth looking into."

"Yes, it is a suspicion which we cannot ignore, Jack, so we will see what he does, how he lives, and just why he has come to the mines."

"And keep our eyes upon the other two Bills as well, for it will not do to let them steal our thunder."

"No, we must be the winners in this game, Jack, and if we need help we know where to find the two best men on the border to aid us."

"Yes, the two best, *except Bandbox Bill*," was the quiet response of Texas Jack, and the two friends turned back on the trail to the tavern, where they sought their room, and were soon fast asleep, leaving others to take care of Hallelujah City.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BUZZ SAW BRAVOS.

THE morning broke upon Hallelujah City with the better element in the ascendancy.

Six-Shooter Sam had decamped, for his cabin was found deserted, the door swinging idly upon its hinges.

Then, too, the log hut of Giant Bruce was tenantless, its door also standing open, while the appearance within was indicative of a hasty desertion.

The other members of Six-Shooter Sam's gang were in a quandary and showed signs of distress. They had been deserted by their leader and his lieutenant without a word of explanation. They felt angry toward them, and far more offended with Bandbox Bill.

It was "pay night" for them, as Six-Shooter Sam always paid his gang a certain sum weekly to be ready for his beck and call.

They were short, therefore, the sums which they had expected to get that night, and so they placed this to the account of the Bravo in Broadcloth.

These men, eight in number, lived near together, as their leader had suggested. Their home was in the edge of the camps, upon a ridge two miles from the tavern.

If they mined any, no one had discovered it; yet they called themselves miners.

Their chief occupation was loafing about the saloons, gambling, drinking, and obeying the commands of their master.

They were a dangerous lot to set loose in a community, and, finding themselves deserted by Six-Shooter Sam and Giant Bruce they were in a fair humor to do mischief.

They slunk out of the Queen of Hearts Saloon soon after Giant Bruce had gone, but went one by one.

Then they met outside, went to another drinking-place and filled up with bad liquor, after which they proceeded to the cabin of their leader to find it abandoned. On to the home of Giant Bruce they tramped, to discover that it too was deserted.

They sat down in a very ugly mood. Each

waited for the other to speak, and at last one of the gang, who answered to the cheerful cognomen of Buzz Saw, and whom the reader has seen before when he recognized the two scouts, broke forth:

"Pardner, as Six-Shooter and Giant hev deserted us, I claims ther right o' leadin', for I has tarning up more toes than any other man in this crowd. And more: I are willin' ter fight right here now fer ther place o' cap'n. Who are ther man as is willin' ter do ther same?"

As Buzz Saw already had whipped out his gun, not another one dared move a muscle, fearing that it would be looked upon as an effort to draw and contest the place of captain, and so only silence followed the words of the self-appointed chief.

Then, too, nobody else just then wished to take the lead and go wrong.

Buzz Saw seemed satisfied, as there was no opposition, and pleased, too, so said:

"Waal, thet settles it, as yer all agrees, and I are cap'n o' ther lay-out, which I hereby christens as ther Buzz-Saw Bravos."

A hum of admiration at this name ran around the crowd, and seeing the good impression he was making, Buzz Saw continued:

"Now, pards, one man in Hallelujah has got the town by the throat, and he are ther pilgrim thet this night druv two o' our best pards out o' the mines."

"I refers ter Bandbox Bill, who yer all knows hev been King Bee long enough."

"He hev nigh onto a dozen graves down in ther Bone Garden all of his makin', and he hev before this druv men out o' ther camps which didn't go feet fu'st, but skipped out o' fear o' him."

"Now, I says this hain't squar' o' one man ter do, and I are the one ter say no to his yes."

"Is yer with me, Bravos?"

A general assent was the response, and Buzz Saw, intoxicated with bad rum and delight at his success mixed, went on to say:

"Now, jest two miles from here are ther home o' that Unknown gent."

"We left him at the saloon, and ef he hain't gone by yet, we'll jist interview him on ther way."

"Ef he hev gone by, then he have skipped to his den and so thar we goes, and ef his cabin catches fire and burns down with him inside, then who is ter blame fer it?"

This was a startling suggestion, and it went far to sober the gang.

But they were bent on mischief, and Buzz Saw soon discovered that they would follow his lead.

"We kin find out by sneakin' up to his stable ef his hosses is thar, and ef so, then he are inside."

"Then we kin light a fire all around ther cabin, and hide, and ef he runs out drop him."

"Then we kin skip fer home and be in our leetle beds long afore dawn."

"Does yer foller me, pards?"

He started down the trail leading from the cabin of Giant Bruce, and in silence the men followed him.

Up the valley trail they went, and when near the home of Bandbox Bill they halted while one of the number, who had long been an Indian-fighter, crept forward to reconnoiter and see if the two horses of the Bravo in Broadcloth were in the little stable in the rear of his cabin.

If the horses were there, and the Bravo was known to have two splendid animals, then the master was at home.

The minutes passed slowly away to the anxious band, while they awaited their comrade's return.

When half an hour had gone by and he did not return they grew nervous, and Buzz Saw at last decided that it was best for all of them to go forward at once.

"We are seven ter one, pards, so come on, and no marcy is ter be shown Bandbox Bill."

Then as silent and merciless as Indians the Buzz Saw Bravos crept on up the hill to do their deadly work.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR DISCOVERY.

THE crowd of men who had decided upon such a cruel end for Buffalo Bill, felt a trifle nervous at the non-return of the man who had gone to reconnoiter the Bravo's premises.

Injun Al, as he was called, not because he was an Indian, but from the reason that he had been a trailer of red-skins at one time, was known to be as cunning as a fox and as noiseless as a snake in his movements, so, much was expected of him from his comrades.

Why he had not returned therefore was a cause for the thought that something had gone wrong.

Had Buzz Saw requested another man to go he was well aware that he would have met with a flat refusal, for not one would have dared venture alone where he might meet the dreaded Bravo.

So Buzz Saw wisely decided that all must go at once, and then he discovered that they were desirous of sticking very close together.

Cautiously they advanced toward the cabin, following the trail and regretting that the waning moon gave so much light.

The pines on the spur concealed the cabin from their view, but they knew just where it was, for several had been near there before, though the Bravo had never encouraged visitors, and the interior of his home was a *terra incognita* to the dwellers in and around Hallelujah City.

Still the place had been reconnoitered from a distance, and it was known that the stable was immediately in the rear of the cabin and adjoining it.

The seven men, with murder in their hearts, therefore were glad to get across the open stretch of moonlight and reach the sheltering pines.

From there to the cabins was about two hundred feet and the cliff, or overhanging spur, with the sheltering trees, cast all in deep shadow.

A torrent falling over the rocks up the range was heard, and the stream flowed swiftly by on its way to the valley.

Otherwise not a sound broke the silence, and the solitude and stillness became awful in their guilty hearts.

Nearer and nearer they approached, Buzz Saw forced to take the lead, as the others hung back and gave him the place of honor with unanimous consent.

Just then he would have preferred to have some one else be the leader; but having elected himself captain he had to accept the dangers of the position.

Nearer and nearer they crept until they were within a few steps of the cabin door, which was sheltered along the front by a shed roof.

Not a sound was heard, and the men halted.

The cracking of a revolver just then would have been music to their ears.

They stood in silence, waiting for their leader to speak.

Buzz Saw knew that he must act, and at once.

Injun Al was not to be seen, so what had become of him?

Had he proven traitor and was there a trap set for them?

Injun Al's love of gold was well known, as also that he would commit any crime to get it.

Perhaps then he had decided that the Bravo would pay him well to betray his comrades.

This thought made Buzz Saw break forth in a profuse perspiration, and he dared not breathe his suspicion to the others.

At last he decided to advance boldly to the door, knock and say that Lady Lou had been shot and Lady Kate wished to have the Bravo come at once to the tavern, giving his name as Mustang Matt, the stable-boy who cared for the horses of the two women.

He whispered his plan to the others and bade them take their positions with him and all fire into the door when it was opened by Bandbox Bill.

This plan was agreed to as a good one and the plotters moved forward to suddenly come to a halt.

There, before their eyes, within reach of their hands was a human form.

It was not standing up, for its feet did not touch the ground, but it was hanging from the limb of a tree overhead.

It was also swinging slowly to and fro.

The men halted as though turned to stone, while there came from the lips of Buzz Saw the horrifying words:

"Pards, it are Injun Al, and he hev been hanged!"

The plotters were too dazed for a moment to move, but only for an instant.

Then around each corner of the cabin resounded two most appalling, deep-mouthed howls, and following them came a series of wildest yells, as though a band of Sioux were rushing into battle.

With answering yells, only of terror, Buzz Saw and his comrades bounded away in flight, while around the corners of the cabin sprang two enormous black dogs, baying loudly and savagely, and following upon the track of the terrified desperadoes.

Down the steep trail they sped like mad, Buzz Saw nobly keeping up his reputation as leader, and their speed was increased as the deep-mouthed dogs ran close behind.

Like a human avalanche they went down the mountain-side into the valley, and not until their tried legs weakened beneath them did they check their swift flight.

The two dogs had halted on the ridge, but kept up their loud baying as though to urge the fugitives on.

As they slackened their pace they did not speak, for they could not.

They were panting like hard-run hounds, and walked along as best they could, resting from their race for life.

By a cross trail they at last reached the two large cabins where they made their home, and up to then no word had been spoken.

They were literally too full of fear for utterance, too tired to talk.

Then candles were lit, for they seemed to want plenty of light, they all assembled in one

cabin, the door was locked, and they threw themselves down upon benches and gazed into each other's faces.

Buzz Saw at last broke the silence, and his words met with an affirmative response in the hearts of all.

He said:

"Pards, thet man are the devil!"

The spell broken, they all began to talk, and for a moment no one understood what was said.

But order came when Buzz Saw asked:

"Did yer mind thet pack o' black dogs, pards?"

"Was thar more'n two of 'em?" one asked.

"Yas, I seen a dozen."

"They was black wolves."

"I thoughted they was b'ars."

"They was as big as buffaloes."

"Pards, Injun Al hed been lifted by a rope."

"Yas; he were dead."

"I jist got one look inter his face as a streak o' moonlight fell onto it, and it jist said to me ter git."

"Yas; and we all got."

"We followed thet cap'n," one said, with a sly look at the crushed Buzz Saw. "Pards, it were awful."

And so the conversation went round, and not un'til day dawned did the frightened plotters dare lie down to seek rest, and not then until a jug of rum had been drained to the dregs.

CHAPTER XVII.

A TIMELY MEETING.

AFTER the two Bills left the Queen of Hearts Saloon they decided to have a walk and view the valley camps by night.

Their brains were busy coursing over the scenes of the night and they wished to talk over their adventure.

"Well, Buffalo, what do you think now of the Bravo in Broadcloth?" asked Wild Bill, as the two walked along the broad valley trail.

"I think he's a little more man than any one I ever saw before, and that is saying a great deal, Wild Bill, when I include you, Frank Powell and Texas Jack."

"Yes, and I'll include one other—yourself, Cody, and make the same remark, for he's more man than I thought was running around this country at large."

"Did you see him pick that Giant up and pitch him over into the corner?"

"Yes; and he had to handle two hundred and eighty or ninety pounds of solid man to do it."

"But he did it."

"With the greatest of ease."

On they walked, until Buffalo Bill asked:

"Who do you think he is?"

"I give it up."

"He seems to run Hallelujah City."

"He does; and he let me out of a row with that terror, Six-Shooter Sam, for our talk was leading up to a better acquaintance, I was sure."

"So could I, and he was a dangerous fellow, too."

"I was sure of it, and you can bet I was watching him close."

"I saw that; but what made him get out so fast when the Bravo gave him a countersign?"

"Didn't he hump himself, Buffalo?"

"He did, and got white as a sheet, too."

"The Unknown had him down fine, as he did the Giant also. Why, he just seemed to breathe upon them and they wilted."

"But will they let him drive them from the camps?"

"That depends upon how much sand they have got; but there were two more strangers there to-night that I had my eye on."

"Who were they?"

"That old white-haired fellow and his Injun side pard."

"Yes, they chipped in in great shape when the storm blew up against the Bravo."

"And they meant work, too, as I could see; but we have gone far enough."

"So I think—quick! down among these rocks, for yonder comes a crowd, and if we avoid them we may save trouble."

The two scouts dropped out of sight among a pile of rocks upon the trail and soon the crowd they had discovered came along, halting not ten steps from them.

It is needless to say that they were Buzz Saw and his comrades, and what they said was overheard and revealed the fact of their destination.

Having decided to keep to the long trail up the valley, to reach the home of Bandbox Bill, they passed on and the scouts stepped out of their place of hiding and stood in silence in the trail for a minute.

"Buffalo."

"Yes."

"They are going to make it warm for the Bravo."

"I should think so, when they speak of setting his cabin on fire and burning him up in it, Bill."

"Can they do it?"

"Did you count them?"

"Eight."

"Correct! and did you know them?"

"Hadn't that happiness, Buffalo."

"They are the gang that were at the saloon to-night."

"Right you are, and we must chip in, too."

"Yes, and take this short cut to the Bravo's cabin and warn him."

"Somehow I have an idea that Bandbox Bill would give those fiends a picnic unaided, but our duty is clear."

"Yes."

They were about to start upon their way, by the shorter cut up to the mountain spur, when the clatter of hoofs fell upon their ears.

They halted, and as but one rider was coming, waited.

He soon came in sight, and seeing them drew rein, while he said:

"Good-evening, gentlemen."

"You are taking risks as strangers to be out alone to-night."

"It is lucky we concluded to take a walk, Bandbox Bill, for we saw a party of eight men go by here just now and overheard their conversation," said Buffalo Bill.

"Plotting mischief I suppose?"

"Worse than mischief, for they took the main trail to your cabin to burn it down, and you in it."

"Ah!"

"They were the gang you held at bay to-night, the backers of Six-Shooter Sam and afterwards of the Giant Bruce."

"Yes, they will do anything; but there is nothing to dread now from either Six-Shooter Sam or Giant Bruce, for they have left the valley."

"You think so?"

"I feel sure of it; but I must get on home to receive my guests."

"We were just going to warn you, taking this short cut, as we heard them say, when we saw you coming."

"You have my thanks, gentlemen."

"And we will go with you now and see you through," blurted Wild Bill.

"I really dislike to give you so much trouble, for I believe I can master the situation."

"The odds are too great, so ride on, we follow," firmly said Buffalo Bill.

"Thank you, and come right on this trail, at a quick pace, and it will bring you to my cabin half an hour ahead of those fellows, who will have over a mile further to go."

"I will ride on and get my allies ready, if you will excuse me."

With this Bandbox Bill rode on at a quick canter up the trail, while Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill followed rapidly on foot.

"Who the mischief are the allies he speaks of, Buffalo?"

"I don't know; but guess we soon will."

After a rapid walk of a mile they came to the cabin and the Bravo in Broadcloth, now on foot, came forward to meet them.

At his heels trotted two huge black dogs, one of which the scouts had seen that afternoon.

"Glad to welcome you, gentlemen, and these are my allies."

"You will find them friendly—to you."

And he referred to his two giant dogs.

The dogs seemed friendly enough to the scouts, and trotted at their heels as their master led the way up to the cabin.

"I find some one has been here before me to-night, though nothing has been disturbed."

"My dogs were in the cabin, and never give sign of their presence without I am around."

"See there!"

"Great God! it is a man hanging before your door!" cried Buffalo Bill.

"Yes; to that large limb, as you see," was the cool reply.

"Why did you hang him?" Buffalo Bill asked.

"I found him there where you see him now."

"He is still warm."

And Wild Bill caught hold of his hands, which were pinioned to his side by a lariat.

"Come, gentlemen, we will go to the rear of the cabin, and thence on top, for I have a little fort up there, and when the visitors come we can give them a surprise."

And the Bravo led the way around the cabin to the rear door, and thence up through a trap to the roof, leaving the two dogs on duty below.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BANDBOX BILL'S GUESTS.

THAT Bandbox Bill had killed the man whom they found hanging before his cabin door both Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill felt assured.

He had remarked that he found the man hanging there when he arrived, that some one had been there before him, and yet the body was still warm, the victim having been dead but a very few minutes at furthest.

Why the Bravo had said what he did they could not understand, for he certainly was amenable to no law, and no one would hold him responsible there.

It was another of his mysterious ways of acting, to deny having killed the man, they decided.

When they ascended by a ladder to the roof of the cabin, they discovered that there was a

dummy roof, as it was, or a false one perhaps it would be better to say.

From an outside view no one would suspect that a man could find shelter on the roof; but once up there, and the cabin logs were seen to extend above the regular roof so as to form a safe retreat and lookout.

From that position the cabin could be well defended, and the scouts could readily see how the intended assassins who sought to set it afire could be shot dead from above and held at bay, for the logs were a perfect protection from anything smaller than a cannon-ball, and the overhanging cliff prevented an attack from that direction.

The Bravo had well chosen a spot for his cabin, and the latter had been built with a view to resistance and siege.

The two dogs were placed where they could hear a low command from their master, and then the three men took up their positions, armed for the fray.

"If I can frighten them off without firing a shot it will be better and more effective, and I believe it can be done," said the Bravo, and the scouts wondered at his merciful intention.

They were not a minute too soon in gaining their position, for they beheld the crowd of desperadoes coming in a body.

They had waited over half an hour for Injun Al, and as he did not return were coming to the attack.

As they reached the swinging form and halted in horror, Bandbox Bill gave a low whine, and instantly the two dogs broke forth in long, loud dismal howls which added to the terror of the gang.

Then the Bravo set the example by uttering a wild, unearthly yell, which the scouts added to with their thrilling war-cries, and as has been seen, away went the appalled villains at break-neck speed down the hill, it being a wonder that some of them did not fall and kill themselves.

Had the desperadoes heard the laughter of the scouts at their flight they would have been mad enough to have returned and fought it out; but their ears were filled with the deep baying of the dogs, who pursued, yet, without orders from their master, had not seized upon the hindmost fugitives.

The brutes were too well trained to disobey a command, and Bandbox Bill had said:

"After them, brave dogs, but don't take hold!"

Wild Bill fairly shook with laughter, and the Bravo said, as the dogs came trotting back:

"It was better than killing them, and there is but one in that band I wish for game, and his time will come."

"You had every right to kill them, Pard Bill, as they came to take your life, yes, to burn you to death."

"Oh, yes, Wild Bill; but I never take life unless it is absolutely necessary, and fright did as well as bullets in this case."

"It did better, I guess, for we could not have killed them all, and they certainly were all nearly scared to death. My! how they did go!"

And Wild Bill again broke out in laughter.

"But what is to be done with that fellow?"

And Buffalo Bill pointed to the form of the dead desperado.

"I'll bury him over in the pines in the morning, but will cut him down now."

And the party descended from the roof.

The body of Injun Al was lowered and placed in the stable, and then the Bravo unsaddled his horse, which he had only had time to put in his stall, after which he said:

"Now, gentlemen, though I have no idea that those fellows will return, I shall claim you as my guests to-night."

"Oh, no; it is not much of a walk back to the camps, thank you," said Buffalo Bill.

And, as Wild Bill also urged their return, the Bravo said no more, but got out a flask of fine liquor and a box of cigars, which he placed before his guests.

Then, as they sat for a while chatting, Wild Bill asked:

"Do you expect to make your home here, pard?"

"For awhile longer; until I accomplish a certain aim I have in view," and the Bravo spoke as though the question had called up unpleasant memories.

"I fear those fellows will give you trouble," Buffalo Bill suggested.

"No, I think not, for I will keep my eye upon them."

"Can you tell us anything about the history of those two remarkable women in the camp?" asked Wild Bill.

"All that I have heard, yes," and Bandbox Bill told the story of the lives of Louise Gray and Kate Fenwick from their coming to Hallelujah City, and added:

"Now they are remarkable women, and somehow I believe they were known to each other before they came here."

"There is a cloud upon their lives in the past of course; but here they are treated with marked respect, and woe be unto the man who would offer an insult to one of them, for the miners consider them under their especial protection."

"They are both making money, the one with her saloon and faro-bank, the other with her tavern, and some fine morning they will have disappeared from Hallelujah City as mysteriously as they came."

"By the way, pard, I have heard that Hallelujah City was the haunt of the band of outlaws known as the Toll-Takers of the Trails?"

"Yes, Wild Bill, I have heard the same, and perhaps it is so; but to find who are the men will be the difficult task for you to do."

"For us to do?"

"Yes, for I know your mission here, gentlemen; but let us not speak of that."

"Try another glass of whisky and a fresh cigar."

The scouts were more than ever mystified, but had a parting drink and a fresh cigar, when the Bravo called his horses out of the stable.

"I am fortunate in having two saddles, so ride into the camps and simply turn the horses loose and they will come home."

"But some one may catch them."

"If they do they are welcome to have them, and ride them if they can do so."

"Were I not here you would find it no easy task to mount them; but like myself and my dogs, my horses are friendly to you," and the Bravo in Broadcloth smiled.

The scouts soon after mounted and rode away, and upon reaching the tavern they threw the reins over the saddle-horns, and the horses went off side by side at a gallop.

"Buffalo, that man is more than ever a mystery to me."

"Yes, Wild Bill, we seem to have struck a land of mystery," was Buffalo Bill's reply, and then they sought their room just as the east began to grow gray with the approach of dawn.

CHAPTER XIX.

NOT TO BE HAUNTED.

WHEN Six-Shooter Sam and Giant Bruce became allies, to fly together from the scenes of Hallelujah City at the command of a man who held some mysterious control over them, it will be remembered that they put spurs to their horses and dashed swiftly along the mountain trail when they caught sight of the Bravo in Broadcloth seated like a black specter on his horse by the roadside.

They had gotten to the trail that led up to the cabin of the Bravo, when Six-Shooter Sam suddenly drew rein.

"What are ther matter, pard?"

"Giant?"

"Yas."

"Do you intend to go through life a haunted man?"

"I don't adzactly catch on, Sam."

"That man wielda a power over you as he does over me?"

"Yas."

"What hold he has over you I can only guess at from my own standpoint, and you seem not inclined to tell me."

"No, I has nothing to say."

"Well, you admit that he drives you out of Hallelujah?"

"As he does you, pard."

"Granted."

"Waal, what then?"

"If we go elsewhere and he comes, we must up stakes and push on."

"Sart'in, ef he says so."

"Well, say he will, until—"

"Ontil what?"

"He decides ter send us so far away that we'll never git back."

"Lordy!"

"He car. do it."

"In your case?"

"Yes."

"And in mine, too."

Neither spoke more just then, but they sat on their horses, Six-Shooter Sam in deep thought and Giant Bruce simply waiting for his companion to say more.

At last, as he had expected, Six-Shooter Sam again spoke.

"Bruce!"

"Ay! ay!"

"I do not intend to be haunted through life."

"Does yer evil deeds trouble you?"

"They are of secondary consideration."

"I see ghosts sometimes myself."

"Well, what haunts me now is not a ghost, but a man, and he is very much alive."

"Bandbox Bill?"

"The same."

"Yas, he has a hauntin' way about him."

"We can end this if we will."

"Go slow, pard."

"No, I am fretted beyond endurance, and I have decided to act."

"What will you do?"

"I will act."

"Kill?"

"Do you dare help me?"

"It's between us two?"

"Yes."

"For life?"

"Life for us, death to him."

"I hinder hesitates."

"And prefer to be haunted through life?"

"Thet are bad, too."

"Are you with me?"

"What is your plan?"

"Well, we will go up the canyon to the rear of his cabin and there leave our horses."

"Well?"

"We will take our lariats with us, along with our weapons, for they are safer."

"How so?"

"We can rope him."

"I see."

"Yes, we can fix him, for he will not come straight home, I am sure."

"When we get in position we can await his coming, and then his life ends."

"But suppose he takes the short cut and is there?"

"Then we will find some way to call him out."

"Can it be done?"

"Yes, for you can whip his horses until he comes out to see what is the matter, and I will be at the corner of the cabin and pour rifle-shots into him; but I hope he will not get there before we do, for I would rather rope him."

"So would I; but I hates to raise hano ag'in' him."

"As I do; but it's between ourselves."

"Won't it make us suspicious o' each other?"

"How so?"

"Won't you want to kill me, or I get a hankerin' ter kill you, jist ter keep the secret in one heart, like?"

"No, I have no fear of that."

"Are you with me?"

"I am."

"For life or death?"

"Yes."

"Take my hand."

They grasped hands and then, without another word, rode slowly off the trail up toward the home of the Bravo in Broadcloth.

They left their horses in a canyon half a mile away from the cabin, and with their weapons and lassoes moved cautiously up toward the home of the man upon whose life they had determined to set the seal of death.

They were noiseless in their movements, and Six-Shooter Sam whispered:

"He has come home, for I hears his horse in ther stable."

"Yas; and thar he stands in front of his cabin."

"By heavens, you are right."

"Now throw your lariat as I do mine!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE LARIAT-THROWERS.

BOTH the desperadoes who had undertaken to free themselves from a haunting foe, as they regarded the Bravo in Broadcloth, were noted lariat-throwers.

Six-Shooter Sam had gone into Mexico, when he first had occasion to dodge justice, and Giant Bruce had passed some time in Texas, and thus they had learned to handle the rope and were never known to ride out without their lariats swung at their saddle-horn.

Now the two men stepped apart in the shadows, coiled their lassoes and were ready to throw them.

There stood their victim, tall, slender and upright, his gaze evidently striving to pierce the darkness down the valley trail.

He was wholly unconscious of danger, and seemed to feel that he was all alone.

"Now!"

With the word issuing from the lips of Six-Shooter Sam, the two lariats went whirling through the air.

That of Giant Bruce fell first around the form of the victim and hauled quickly taut, pinioned his arms to his side.

The nose of the lariat thrown by Six-Shooter Sam caught around the man's neck and was drawn taut in a second and the victim dragged violently to the ground.

Then the other end, to which a stone had already been attached, was thrown over the limb of a tree fifteen feet from the ground and the form was dragged into the air.

Making his lariat fast to the tree-trunk, Six-Shooter Sam bade Giant Bruce to do the same with his free end, and it was tied to a post that upheld the shed across the cabin front.

"Now we will see if we cannot find some gold to save our consciences, Pard Bruce," said Six-Shooter Sam.

But Giant Bruce stood in the attitude of one listening, and bounding away called out:

"Quick, for our lives! horsemen are coming this way!"

Six-Shooter Sam needed no second bidding, but sped on after his companion up the canyon to where their horses were, and mounting in hot haste they rode away at breakneck speed, pushing directly into the mountains and anxious to avoid all trails.

They had done their deed, and somehow they felt the more haunted by the act than had their victim remained alive to dog their steps.

But this feeling neither dared betray to the other.

Had they not run off in their fright they would have seen the "horsemen" of Giant Bruce's imagination dwindle down to one horse and rider.

He dashed up to the door of his cabin to draw rein quickly as he beheld that swaying form.

"Ah! there has been devilish work done here," he said, and dismounting he let his horse go into the stable and then moved about like one who was at home.

It was the Bravo in Broadcloth, as the reader has surmised, and that he spoke the truth when he told the scouts that he had not hanged the man is now known.

He met the scouts, treated them well, as has been seen, and after their departure sat out in front of his cabin smoking a cigar, and buried in thought.

Soon the clatter of hoofs reached his ears, and he arose as his two riderless horses dashed up to his side.

"Brave boys! you did your work well."

"I am happy in having four such allies, dumb brutes as you are," and he gave the dogs an affectionate pat on the heads also.

Then he removed the saddles, and entering his cabin was soon fast asleep, unmindful of the dawning day.

After several hours of slumber he arose and set to work to prepare breakfast, to the great delight of the two dogs.

This done with, the horses were staked out in the valley, and taking a pick and shovel the Bravo entered the stable and raised the dead form of Injun Al to his shoulder.

Without any effort he strode down the hillside to a little spot on the bank of the rivulet and placed the corpse upon the ground.

Then he stood regarding it.

"It is poor Indian Al, my spy, and he was coming to warn me, I am sure."

"His form and mine are of a size, and then he always wore a black sombrero as I do, while he kept his blanket coat buttoned close around him, and was mistaken in the darkness for me."

"This lariat is of Mexican make, and Six-Shooter Sam came here from Mexico."

"The other is Texan, and Giant Bruce was for some time in Texas."

"Then, too, hardly any other men in the mines that I recall, carried a lariat than these two."

"How did they screw up their courage to the point of killing me?"

"But they did make the attempt, and my coming frightened them off before they could discover their mistake."

"Now to bury Indian Al decently."

He dug a grave, wrapped a blanket around the form, and soon a new-made mound alone marked the resting-place of "Injun Al."

Then the Bravo went back and studied the position of the lariat-throwers when the fatal coil was cast.

Taking their trail with the cunning and skill of an Indian he followed it where their horses had been left, while they went to the cabin on their deadly mission.

Then he returned to his cabin, and mounting his horse rode into Hallelujah City.

In the edge of the camps was a small cabin, where dwelt two red-skin miners.

They were quiet men, spoke little English, worked where they got a job, and troubled no one.

In the cabin door sat one of the Indians as the Bravo rode up, and he rose politely and addressed Bandbox Bill in his native tongue.

"Where is Night Eye?" asked the Bravo.

"Working in the Blue Mines," was the response in the Ute tongue.

"Go and find him, Panther Foot, mount your horses, ready for a long trip, and come to my cabin."

"The chief has spoken," replied Panther Foot and Bandbox Bill rode away without another word.

An hour after, the two Indians, splendid specimens of their race, rode up to the cabin of the Bravo.

He at once led them to the spot where Six-Shooter Sam and Giant Bruce had left their horses, and after a few words of instruction from the Bravo, they started off on the trail of the two desperadoes.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MYSTIFIED TRAILERS.

DURING the afternoon of the day following the scenes at the saloon of the Queen of Hearts, Texas Jack and Surgeon Powell took seats upon the benches in front of Kate's Kitchen, and were soon after joined by Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill.

The face of the surgeon, not concealed by his long hair and head-dress, was so well stained to the hue of an Indian that even the keen eyes of the scout did not detect the cheat.

As for Texas Jack, it was well that his large spectacles hid his eyes, or the twinkle in them would have betrayed his joy at deceiving his friends.

His mustache having been shaved off, and his wig of white, kinky hair being perfect, with his face also stained and roughened with walnut-juice, and his spectacles, a hump on his back which looked natural, and his changed walk, as completely disguised him as did the Indian rig of the surgeon, and that mother Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill suspected the cheat, was evident.

"Strangers in Hallelujah City, pard?" said Wild Bill to Texas Jack.

"Yes, like you is, pard."

"Going to remain long?"

"Maybe, can't tell, fer we may be planted here, fer bullets fly lively in these parts."

"Yes; but you did not seem to have much fear of them last night."

"Not when duty calls, pard, is Red Chief an' me so skeert as we looks, and I allus am with ther under dog in the fight."

"You and your red-skin friend seem to be fast pards."

"Ther best in ther world, an' we has cause ter be, fer we has been on many a trail together."

"You are a trapper, I take it?"

"I are trapper, scout, guide and anything I kin git dust out of in a honest way, pard."

"Think of mining about here now?"

"Like as not, pard."

"Me and Red Chief is a-lookin' around ter strike a good trail."

"Never come across the Toll-Takers in your travels, have you?"

"Waal, we come putty nigh it, and but fer a leetle gal in black clothes we might have run upon a snag."

"Ah! you have seen then the Woman in Black, as they call her?"

"Waal, we got a warnin' up in ther Shadow Valley not ter go runnin' round loose, as ther' was Toll-Takers up thar, so we just lighted out in this direction."

"Who warned you?"

"We seen a gal on horseback, all dressed up in black, same as ef her mammy were dead, and we laid out ter catch her."

"But her horse were too flip fer our critturs, though they do be fast, and she jist left us out o' sight; but when it were dark we seen a leetle advice writ on a rock ter git, and we got."

"Ah! and you know nothing of this woman?"

"She didn't stay ter be interdooced, but as she hinted in that fire-writin' ther Toll-Takers was anxious ter git intimate with us, I concluded we'd go."

"Did you ever hear of any one else thus warned by this Woman in Black?"

"Waal, I heerd tell how Texas Jack, from Fort L., got a warnin' ther saved his life."

"Indeed! and do you know where her haunt is?"

"C'u'dn't tell yer any more than I knows adzactly whar ther Toll-Takers is."

"Maybe you knows, pard?"

"No."

"As yer and yer pard are Government scouts, maybe yer is a-lookin' ter take ther trail o' the Toll-Takers?"

Wild Bill shook his head, and, as he and Buffalo Bill walked off together, said:

"Buffalo, that old man is no fool."

"So I thought, Bill."

"I believe he and that Sioux chief are on some special trail."

"Perhaps they are, for why they are here no one knows; but they chipped in last night in great shape to help Bandbox Bill out."

"They did, and I wonder if he knows them."

"I had not thought of that; but did you hear what those fellows hinted awhile ago about the Bravo?"

"You mean the gang in the hotel?"

"Yes."

"They said that some here had an idea that Bandbox Bill was a spy for the Toll-Takers, if not their chief."

"Yes, for he was always on hand when an Overland coach arrived and departed."

"I would find it hard to believe."

"As would I; but this is a strange country and a stranger people, so we must not be surprised at anything that turns up; but there are the fair gambler and our hostess, so let us see if we can get any items from them."

There was a clump of cedars in one end of the old fort, and here had been built a rustic arbor.

It was a favorite resort of the two women on pleasant afternoons, and with some sewing in hand they were now going there when the scouts joined them.

Texas Jack saw their act and said:

"Pard Red Chief, we haven't got on our good looks, so can't expect to shine in ladies' society; but just see those two dandy scouts."

"I see them, and our make-up leaves us out in the cold."

"I wish we had known about the fair sex in Hallelujah, I think we would have come as our natural selves," sighed Jack, and Surgeon Powell laughed.

In the mean time the scouts had joined Lady Lou and Lady Kate, and were invited to accompany them to the arbor, which they were most glad to do.

"Lady Kate, I wish to ask you if you ever heard of another woman in these wild regions other than yourself and Lady Lou?" Buffalo Bill asked.

The two women exchanged glances and then Kate Fenwick said:

"Yes, I have had lady guests at the hotel, women who have come to the mines in search of a runaway husband, truant son or a brother."

"But they have never remained here?"

"We two have alone remained," was the sad reply.

But Buffalo Bill wished to know more, so asked:

"Have you ever heard of a Woman in Black, one who is seen on the trails always near the scenes of the Toll-Takers' depredations?"

"Yes, we have heard the strangest stories of her, and I have been anxious to meet her—perhaps I may some day."

"Can you tell me anything of her?"

"Only that she is said to be the chief of the Toll-Takers."

"Ah! I supposed Major Mephisto was chief of that outlaw band?"

"Have you ever seen any one who knows aught of Major Mephisto, who ever saw him in fact?"

"Well, no."

"Then I lean to the idea that a woman is, and why not, for Lou here is a gambler, and I the hostess of a frontier tavern."

"Why might not another woman be still bolder in the life she leads than we are?"

This question was unanswerable, and the scouts were both of the same opinion after an hour's talk with the strange women, that perhaps they knew more of this Woman in Black than they cared to admit.

"We have come to the right place, Wild Bill, to find the trail of the Toll-Takers."

"So I believe, Buffalo," was the reply.

CHAPTER XXII.

MAJOR'S DAUGHTER.

I WILL now return to Fort B—, the scene of the starting-point of Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill, upon their difficult and perilous duty of hunting down the Toll-Takers of the Trails.

The fort was a large one, and a pleasant abiding-place out upon the far frontier.

Some four hundred soldiers were stationed there, mostly of infantry, with a company of light artillery and one of cavalry.

Colonel Royston was a beau ideal soldier and commander, and the headquarter circle was a pleasant one.

A dozen officers had their families with them, and the most beautiful of all the maidens was Heloise Hembold, the daughter of Major Howell Hembold of the cavalry.

The major was a quiet man of forty-five, with a stern face and a reserved manner that at times seemed cold.

He had been a dashing officer in early life, and had married, when stationed upon the Texan frontier, a Mexican lady.

Of this marriage nothing was known save that his wife had died after a few years of wedded life, and her little daughter had been sent to a distant relative to care for.

When she was thirteen years of age, Heloise had been taken to the frontier to live with her father, and so she had almost been brought up in a frontier fort.

The chaplain and the school-teacher had been her instructors, as far as books were concerned; but the young officers had taught her how to shoot, and since her babyhood she had been an expert rider.

The scouts taught her to throw a lariat, follow a trail and read Indian signs, and so at eighteen Miss Hembold was considered "educated."

Shesung divinely, accompanying herself upon the guitar, she sketched with rare skill and danced with a grace that made her an object of envy to awkward maidens, while with a faultless form and beautiful face she had turned the head of every young soldier at the fort, yes, and of some of the older ones, too.

Such a thing as fear Heloise was unacquainted with, and remembering that her mother had been a Mexican, she delighted in patterning her dress after the picturesque costume of that country.

She always wore a sombrero, fringed with gold and embroidered, and a silk sash always encircled her slender waist, while, when she went for a ride over the country, she carried a small rifle at her saddle-horn and a revolver in her belt.

The daring girl had had some very narrow escapes from Indians and outlaws, and only her own nerve and the speed of her horse had saved her.

To her father she was devoted, and he fairly idolized her, she being the only one who did not seem to stand in awe of the stern-faced soldier.

One afternoon, soon after the departure of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill from the fort, an invitation came from a military post sixty miles away on the Overland, for the young ladies of B— and a number of officers, to attend an entertainment to be given in honor of the commandant's birthday anniversary.

As the Overland coach was to go through on the day before, the young ladies, with an officer's wife as chaperon, and eight in number, decided to ride through by stage, the officers going on horseback with a small escort of cavalry.

In gay spirits the party started, Heloise, however, sorry that she could not go on horse-

back, as she had been anxious to do, but could find no girl companion who would dare make the long ride in the saddle, as she wanted to do.

The coach had gotten a dozen miles from the fort when a Pony Express messenger was seen coming like the wind on the trail.

His horse fairly flew over the level stretch toward the Lill, which the coach was then ascending.

The fort was not on the direct Pony Express Trail, but when dispatches of importance were addressed there the riders were wont to go by and drop them, and the arrival of one of these dashing young horsemen was an event of importance to all.

Now the driver halted his coach on the hill for all to get out and see the flying pony-rider as he approached.

Up the hill he came, his horse hardly slackening his pace as he mounted, and in a few moments more he drew rein suddenly at the group about the coach.

"Is Captain Willis here?" he asked, in his terse tones, with the air of one who did not wish to be detained.

"I am Captain Willis?" said a handsome young officer, stepping forward.

"I carried dispatches to the fort, sir, and Colonel Royston asked me to bring this to you. Good-day."

And the Pony Rider dashed on like the wind. Captain Willis broke open the envelope and read:

"CAPTAIN WURT WILLIS:—

"Sir:—News has just come in that leads me to believe a prowling band of red-skins will follow your trail, after you pass Oak Creek, so go into ambush with your men and check them, while the coach keeps on."

"If after an hour's delay they do not appear, push on after the coach, for I will send a detachment from the fort to look after the Indians."

"I send this hastily by Pony Rider messenger."

"ROYLSTON, Colonel Com'd'g."

Captain Willis's face wore a troubled look, as he read the communication; but he said, cheerily:

"Driver, you push on, for we will be detained on the trail an hour, to see if there are not some red-skins on our track; but you, ladies, are in no danger."

The stage-coach rolled on its way once more, leaving the officers and the dozen cavalymen to seek an ambush on the trail, and deprived of their escort, but for Heloise Hembold all would have felt very blue.

But she was the life of the party, as the coach rolled on its way.

But when night came on a depression seemed to fall upon all, as with the darkness gloomy thoughts arose of those dear to them and the dread that the remaining of the officers behind meant far more than Captain Willis had been willing to admit.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HALTED ON THE OVERLAND.

THE weird shadows of the Overland Trail, the darkness and the fact that duty had compelled their gallant escorts to temporarily desert, had its impression upon Mrs. Willis, the pretty young chaperon, as well as those under her charge.

Then even Heloise Hembold felt the depression and ceased to talk, and silence settled upon all.

It was a silence broken only by the rumbling of the wheels, the clatter of the hoofs of the six horses, the occasional crack of the whip, and now and then a word from Driver Tom Todd to his team.

The trail had run into a wild part of the mountains, and it certainly looked dark and dismal without, until all could almost feel the solitude.

Occasionally the long-drawn-out howl of a wolf would echo among the hills, or the hoot of an owl, disturbed by the passing coach, would startle the fair inmates of the stage.

Suddenly the rapid clatter of hoofs was heard behind the vehicle, and the driver called down:

"They is a-comin', ladies."

A shout of joy went up, and Tom Todd was himself glad that the escort was coming, for he muttered to himself:

"They was gay as monkeys at a circus afore sunset; but, Lordy! since ther darkness hev come on they is as dismal as mourners at a buryin'."

"They is ther dismallest lot o' pretty petticoats thet I ever druv afore."

While the excitement of knowing the escort was reviving the spirits of all was at its height, Heloise Hembold demurely remarked:

"Suppose they should not be the escort?"

"Ah, Heloise, who else can they be?" cried one of the girls.

"Toll-Takers."

The reply silenced the girls as if a shot had come into their midst, and Tom Todd asked himself:

"What's up now?"

"Lordy, but hain't wimmens onnery in ther way?"

As the girls did not hear the question, and there was no one else to answer, Tom Todd answered it himself with:

"Yes, they be."

In a few minutes a stern voice called out, as three horsemen appeared in sight:

"Is that the Fort B— coach?"

"It are."

"Halt, then, for I have orders from Colonel Royston."

Tom Todd promptly drew rein and put on the brakes, while half a dozen heads peered out of the window.

"Pardon, Miss Hembold, but I am Sergeant Merwin, and come with a message from your father."

"Well, sergeant, what is it?" asked Heloise quietly.

"The major's horse fell with him, miss, and broke his arm, and he begs you to return, for I have a horse for you, and the colonel's compliments, miss, and regrets that he could not send a commissioned officer after you."

"I hope my father is not more seriously hurt, Sergeant Merwin, than you allow me to know?" said Heloise, with a calmness that surprised all.

"No, miss, it is only as I said, but he wishes you with him."

"I will go at once, sergeant."

"Here is your riding-skirt, miss, and cap," and the sergeant passed the articles named into the coach for Heloise to don, while Mrs. Willis asked:

"Sergeant, did you pass my husband, Captain Willis and his party on the trail?"

"Yes, miss, they had feared being overtaken by red-skins, so halted to ambush them; but Captain Willis told me to say they would soon be along, and not to worry."

"Thank you, sergeant."

Then Heloise, with many regrets from all, and half a decision to turn back, bade her friends good-night and stepped out of the stage, when the sergeant raised her to her saddle.

"I hope you will not find it so bad as reported, Heloise," cried Mrs. Willis, and the young girl rode away, the sergeant dropping back behind her and his two men following close upon the heels of his horse.

And on rolled the coach once more, the party within now more gloomy than ever, for though the bells of the fort, Heloise was loved even by her rivals, and was always the life of an entertainment.

So all felt the deepest sympathy for the young girl, while also they were anxious as the coach moved on and the escort did not overtake them.

At last Mrs. Willis put her head out of the window and called:

"Driver Todd!"

"Yes, miss."

"I am Mrs. Willis."

"Then it's ma'm to you—ma'm, as you is spliced, while ther misses is not yet, though they is hopin' ter be, fer that are woman natur'."

A burst of laughter greeted this homily from the box on their sex, and Mrs. Willis, when she could command utterance, said:

"I wished to beg you not to drive so fast, Mr. Todd, as we are anxious to have the gentlemen overtake us."

"Yes, miss, I means ma'm, it's what all ther leddies like, ter hev men folks arter overtakin' 'em in ther run through life."

"You seem to know our sex pretty well, Mr. Todd?"

"I has hed cause ter, ma'm, bein' as I was married onst."

"And is Mrs. Todd dead?"

"The Lord only knows, ma'm, and ther devil only cares, not givin' you a short answer."

"Ah! she left you, then?"

"No, indeed; I deserted her, ma'm, fer she were wuss than a whole cage o' cats when she got r'iled— The escort is comin', ma'm, for I hears 'em."

A number of musical voices broke forth in a cheer at this news, and soon after up dashed Captain Willis and his party.

"It was a false alarm, I guess, for we saw no Indians, though I waited for two hours," said the captain.

"How sad it was for poor Heloise to go back, Wurt."

"For Miss Heloise to go back?" asked Captain Willis.

"How and where?"

Mrs. Willis told what had occurred, and sternly from his lips broke the words:

"My God! no such man passed us, and there has been foul play here."

"Hold, driver! we must not go a step further now!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FAIR DESERTER.

THE words of Captain Willis startled all; but he had reason for their utterance, which he hastened to explain.

In the first place, Major Hembold had taken his rifle and gone for a gallop over the prairie just after the stage-coach left, and by a short cut had gained the hills and come upon the party in waiting, just before sunset.

He heard with surprise what news the Pony Rider had brought, and had waited with the officers until they felt sure that no force from the fort would come that far, and then he had started on his return.

Captain Willis had wished to send an escort of four men back with him, but he was an old plainsman, splendidly mounted, and had preferred to return alone.

So he had left the officers not an hour before, and yet Heloise had been gone for half an hour, or more.

Then, too, no sergeant and two men had passed the officers' party, nor could they come from the fort by any other trail without a long ride round.

Further, Sergeant Merwin was known to be seriously ill in the fort, having been laid up for a week.

When these facts were known, it became evident to all that some foul play had been carried on.

Mrs. Willis, when questioned, said that she knew Sergeant Merwin by sight, as a soldier at the fort, and supposed the man to have been he, but yet his voice had sounded differently, as she remembered the tones of Merwin, who was a sergeant.

As the man had reported that Captain Willis had sent word they would soon be along and not to worry, it was proof that he was a fraud.

Then Tom Todd stated that he had noticed that the other two men were not in full uniform, and that they seemed to be watching for the coming of some one up the trail while Miss Hembold was getting ready.

"You must turn your coach around, Todd, and drive back to the fort with all speed, and I will take the responsibility with the Overland Company."

"Lieutenant Ames, you go back with the coach, report to Colonel Royston and Major Hembold just what has occurred, and I will wait here with the rest of the party, or rather at the spot where Driver Todd tells me those men went off with Miss Hembold."

"Ride ahead with all speed, Ames, taking two men with you, and let the others follow with the coach."

"When Colonel Royston knows all, he will doubtless send a force here at once, and if we can do nothing to-night, though they had best bring lanterns, we can be on the trail at the first dawn of day."

Thus ordered, Lieutenant Ames went off at a run, followed by two men, and Tom Todd turned to the rightabout, muttering to himself something not very complimentary to the fair sex.

He drew rein at the spot where he had halted for the sergeant and his men, and then drove on at a swift pace escorted by two lieutenants and a dozen cavalrymen.

The several other officers and half-dozen soldiers remained with Captain Willis, who was determined that no time should be lost in following the trail of those who he now felt assured had kidnapped the beautiful girl.

Tom Todd was a good driver, and, as he was wont to say, "he could shut his eyes and drive the trail," so that the darkness did not trouble him in the slightest.

He sent the team bowling along at a great pace, and though the coach often rocked like a ship at sea, those within made no complaint.

They were too subdued, too anxious, to find fault.

Lieutenant Ames had gone ahead like the wind, and he was known to be well-mounted, as were also the two men who accompanied him.

When the coach was within two miles of the fort they saw a body of horsemen approaching, and Tom Todd drew rein.

It was Major Hembold and Captain Alf Taylor and his gallant company of troopers.

In a few words all was told, and it became known that no such letter as Captain Willis had received had been sent from Captain Royston. No Pony Rider had been near the fort that day.

This proved a deep laid plot to get possession of Heloise Hembold, and with a heart full of vengeance Major Hembold dashed on to join Captain Willis at his post in the mountains.

Captain Alfred Taylor had brought with his two-score troopers half a dozen of the best scouts at the fort, and the force was equipped for a week's march, quick as had been their getting off after hearing the news from Lieutenant Ames.

That gallant young officer, mounted upon a fresh horse, also returned with the troop, for he had a very warm place in his heart for Heloise, and with the officers then with Captain Willis there would be certainly a dashing party to take the trail of the daring kidnappers of the beautiful girl.

Their horses were not spared, knowing that they would have a rest while waiting for dawn, and they arrived at the place to find Captain Willis had camped on the trail, had his sentinels out and was waiting for the reinforcements.

A number of lanterns had been brought along, and these being lighted each scout took one and the search for the trail was begun.

The tracks of the three horses were soon found, and slowly the scouts moved off on the trail, the troopers following slowly.

Thus a short distance was gone over when a brook was reached and all further search was useless, and so they had to camp until the dawn.

The daylight was near at hand when the sound of hoofs was heard, and a scout dashed in from the fort.

He brought a letter from Colonel Royston which read:

"MY DEAR HEMBOLD:—

"Hasten to send you a note addressed to you, and which Mrs. Willis found pinned on the cushion in Miss Heloise's room."

"Heaven grant you be successful, and if you need more men, send for them."

"In haste,

"Yours

"ROYLSTON."

The major grasped the letter, tore open the envelope, which was addressed to him in his daughter's handwriting, and read:

"MY DEAR FATHER:—

"What I-ads me to take the step I now do, you must never know; but I go not to unhappiness. I pledge you, nor will wrong act of mine cause you to feel sham, and sorrow."

"Do not attempt to follow me, for to find me will be impossible."

"More I cannot say, other than that some day we may meet again."

"Ever your devoted

"HELOISE."

The letter fell from the hand of the major, and strong man that he was, he sunk unconscious into the arms of Captain Taylor, who caught him as he fell.

CHAPTER XXV.

BUFFALO BILL RECEIVES A LETTER.

WHILE the scouts were seated in front of Kate's Kitchen, enjoying the balmy air that swept up the valley, and the grand scenery upon all sides, a horseman rode up to the hotel, the animal and the rider showing that they had pushed hard on the road.

Texas Jack and Surgeon Powell were not far away, and both recognized the horseman as a scout from Fort B—, so they drew near to see why he had come.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill also knew the man's coming had something to do with them, for the former said:

"By Jove! it is Jack Crawford,* and something has gone wrong at the fort."

The messenger was a fine-looking man, clad in buckskin, wore his hair long, and his leggings were tucked into the tops of high cavalry boots.

He was well armed and mounted, and looked just what he was, a skilled and daring scout of the plains.

"Well, Jack, glad to see you. Hope nothing is wrong at the fort?"

"Well, yes, there is, but this letter will explain, and if you wish any extra news I can give it to you soon as I have looked after my horse, for we came through rapidly, I assure you," and Jack Crawford led his horse around to the stables, while Buffalo Bill ordered something for the scout to eat.

Then he and Wild Bill went to the little arbor on the fort, which Lady Lou and Kate Fenwick had deserted, and sat down to read the letter.

It was from Captain Taylor and as follows:

"FORT B—,

"Noon, Thursday."

"By Jove, Bill, how Jack Crawford has ridden, for this is dated noon on Thursday," broke in Buffalo Bill.

"You bet he is a flyer, when he starts on an important mission; but what says the letter?"

"MY DEAR CODY:—

"I write in haste to place before you just what has occurred here, and Jack Crawford, who bears this to you, will bring back word what you deem best to be done."

"An entertainment was given by the officers of Military Post Number 10, and the young ladies, under the care of Captain and Mrs. Willis, started by stage to attend the affair, accompanied by half a dozen officers and an escort of cavalry."

"Of course Miss Heloise Hembold went along, and when Tom Todd's coach had reached the foothills, a pretended Pony Rider overtook the party with a supposed letter from Colonel Royston, telling Captain Willis that news had come in of a band of Sioux following the stage-trail, and to drop behind and ambush them, and help would also be sent from the fort."

"Captain Willis obeyed, the coach went on, darkness came, and three horsemen overtook it."

"One professed to be Sergeant Merwin, who had been sent after Miss Hembold."

"The major, he said, had been thrown from his horse and had broken his arm, and wished her to return."

"He had a led horse with side-saddle, and more, Miss Hembold's riding skirt and hat."

"She went without suspicion, of course; but soon after Captain Willis and his party overtook the stage, and the fraud was discovered."

"They had seen the major not long before, no sergeant had passed them, and Merwin was laid up in hospital, very ill."

"Willis acted promptly, dispatching Lieutenant Ames back to fort with news, sent coach on its return with escort, and remained with few men at point where the kidnapping had occurred."

"In the night Major Hembold arrived, I going with my troop, and we found the trail, but lost it at a stream, so were compelled to remain until morning."

*Jack Crawford, known on the plains as "Captain Jack," and "The Poet Scout of the Black Hills," Jack Crawford was noted as a scout and courier, and of late has developed into a poet and lecturer.—THE AUTHOR

Soon after note came by Courier Crawford from colonel, stating that letter had been found in Miss Hembold's room addressed to her father.

"Here is what letter says, for I give you full particulars, so that you may not act blindly."

Here followed, in lady's handwriting, a copy of the letter already known to the reader.

Then Captain Taylor went on to say:

"This of course decided us all in the opinion that Miss Heloise had been kidnapped by her own sweet will.

"The pretended letter from Colonel Royston to Willis, about the Indians, was a most clever forgery, and written on official paper.

"This of course was written beforehand, and of course we put it down to Miss Heloise.

"The man claiming to be Sergeant Merwin had the skirt and cap of Miss Heloise, and search revealed the fact that certain wearing apparel, jewelry and other articles had been taken by the fair deserter from her room, showing a well-concocted plan of leaving.

"But who were those men?

"What aid had she from people in the fort?

"Who are those aiders and abettors of her going?

"What has she gone for?

"Who has she gone with, and why did she leave?

"These questions remaining unanswered, have nearly driven the ladies of the fort crazy, and I confess to intense curiosity in the matter myself.

"The blow nearly killed the poor major, and he insists that his daughter was kidnapped, and did not go of her own sweet will.

"He claims her letter to be a forgery, and, despite all circumstantial evidence against her, vows that she is the victim of a foul conspiracy.

"If there is a man, woman or child in the fort who agrees with him, I have yet to find that one.

"As to myself, women are to me a Chinese puzzle, and I have quit betting upon what they will and will not do.

"Jack Crawford will tell you where the kidnapping was done, and that we followed the trail to Smoke Top, where we lost it for good, and as this is not very far from the sainted locality known as Glory Hallelujah City, where you now are, I put the case, at Colonel Royston's command, into your hands.

"It is more important than hunting Toll-Takers and Specter Women, so go at it at once.

"If you need my troop as a reserve at some point, send word back by Courier Crawford, and I'll be there.

"Whatever you need, send for, but find this fair deserter.

"The major is almost prostrated at the suspense, and to find she was dead, I believe, would be a relief to him.

"Now, Bill, I staked last night five bets at big odds on you, with brother officers, that you would find the girl, so go in and win.

"My regards to Hikok, and tell him that I am glad that you have so able an adviser in this matter.

"Write me what you think, and with my wish for your success,

Yours,

"TAYLOR."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SCOUT'S LETTER.

A SETTLED gloom had fallen upon all in the fort.

It seemed as though death had taken a loved one from the midst of the army family.

Heloise Hembold, the idol of her father, the belle of the frontier posts, beloved by her companions of her own sex and the pet of the soldiers had gone from their midst.

She was the last one of whom such an act would have been dreamed.

She had plotted and planned so well, and she had carried out her daring escape grandly.

How had she accomplished it? was the wonder of all.

She had been so full of life, so joyous the while, and yet she had been carrying in her heart a secret which had well-nigh broken her father's heart.

People pitied him and shook their heads when he said that the whole thing was a conspiracy, that his child had not deserted him of her own will.

Of course it was felt certain that she had some one to aid her.

And more—there was a lover in the case.

But, who was this lover?

People put on their thinking-caps and recalled her past.

Of all the gallant officers from the various posts not one could be pointed out as being the favorite of Heloise Hembold.

Lovers she had by the score, and all were her friends, young and old, married and single, but not one man could boast of having won her love.

To all she was the same.

Who, then, was the man for whom she had deserted her father and her friends.

Then some of the ladies, in raking over the ashes of the past, recalled that Major Hembold had once been away for six months, sent on a special duty up to the Columbia River country.

At that time, when her father was away, a stranger had come to the fort.

He was a young man, very attractive-looking, with suave, winning manners, and the air of a well-bred gentleman.

The ladies had all liked him, but not with the gentlemen had he been popular.

He had come to see Kate, having met her when at boarding-school in New York some years before.

If Heloise cared for him she failed to show it, though they were much together.

The stranger had proven himself no city-bred man, for no more daring rider could be found at the fort, and in the shooting-matches the officers got up he had won the prizes invariably.

Lieutenant Ames, a splendid swordsman, and jealous of his attentions to Heloise, had challenged him to a trial with rapiers, hoping to humiliate him, as he had said that he handled a blade fairly well.

The result was unexpected to all, except the stranger, who had been introduced by Heloise as Mr. Menlo Parke, of New York.

Now Mr. Menlo Parke disarmed Lieutenant Ames with an ease that astonished all, and with cutlass, broadsword and rapier bouts with other officers he serenely proved himself the victor.

After a couple of months' stay at the fort he departed, but Heloise was joked about her lover for awhile and then he was forgotten.

But when she so mysteriously disappeared it was remembered that the major, upon his return from the Columbian country, and hearing of the visit of Menlo Parke, had been very much worried, for some reason.

These things were raked up now, and it was decided that Heloise, knowing the opposition of her father to Menlo Parke, for reasons which the major kept wholly to himself, had run off with that very brilliant young gentleman.

This being settled, it soon became as a decided fact, and of course the major had all the sympathy, especially as he was still so blind as to assert that his child had been kidnapped, and that she was the object of a cruel conspiracy.

To dissent from him in this opinion so angered him that all would virtually agree with his view of the case, and Colonel Royston constantly kept scouting parties out to try and discover some trace of the missing girl.

Thus days had gone by, and one afternoon a horseman was seen coming across the prairie at a slow canter.

"It is Courier Jack Crawford," reported the signal lookout, and all knew that he had been sent to find Buffalo Bill and give him the news of the kidnapping of Heloise Hembold.

He soon rode into the fort, his horse jaded and his own appearance indicating that he had ridden far and hard.

All felt anxious to know what Buffalo Bill had to say of the affair.

His judgment was well known, and his word was an authority.

"Did you see Cody, Jack?" asked Captain Taylor, as the scout dismounted.

"Yes, sir."

"You found him at Hallelujah City?"

"I did, sir, and I have a letter here for you from him."

"You have done splendidly, Crawford; but now seek rest."

And Captain Taylor took the letter and sought Colonel Royston's quarters.

"I have a letter from Cody, sir, so we'll see what he says."

And opening the envelope Captain Taylor read aloud as follows:

"KATE'S KITCHEN,

"HALLELUJAH CITY,

"Tuesday Noon.

"MY DEAR CAPTAIN TAYLOR:—

"It was a surprise, and a painful one, to both Wild Bill and myself, to learn the sad news from the fort, of Miss Hembold's disappearance.

"After reading your letter carefully, and having a long talk with Jack Crawford, I came to the conclusion that Major Hembold is right, that there is a conspiracy, and that Miss Heloise has been kidnapped.

"In this opinion Wild Bill wholly concurs, and after Jack had heard our reasoning out of the case, he became convinced also that Miss Heloise did not voluntarily leave her father and her friends.

"We will at once take the trail where it was left off, and if we need aid will send to you, so please have a couple of scouts go to a place which Crawford will indicate, and await there for news from us.

"Two others had best be stationed half-way between the first couple's camp and the fort, and Crawford will place them, if he does not remain himself, which he is anxious to do.

"If you deem best, you might camp with a score of your men within easy reach of the scout couriers, for when I send for you, we will want you bad, and in a hurry, too.

"Of course you know best what to do.

"Crawford will know about where to find us, when you are ready to move into position, and notify me.

"As to our work here, perhaps the kidnapping of Miss Heloise will help us on amazingly.

"Perhaps it would be best not to let it be known that I have an opinion that Miss Hembold was kidnapped, for whoever is at the bottom of the plot certainly has strong allies in the fort, and it might be well to let people think the young lady has run off with some one, and her father is content to let her go, only tell the major not to despair.

"With my compliments to the colonel,

"Yours truly,

"BUFFALO BILL."

CHAPTER XXVII.

JACK CRAWFORD'S STORY.

WHEN Captain Alfred Taylor finished reading the scout's letter, he saw a strange expression upon the face of Colonel Royston.

"Well, captain, how about Cody's opinion?" he said with a smile.

"I have unbounded faith in Buffalo Bill, colonel, and Wild Bill holds his idea too."

"Yes, and he says Jack Crawford was won over by their reasoning too."

"Yes, colonel."

"They are three long-headed men, captain."

"They are indeed, sir."

"Cody never jumps at a wrong conclusion, and there is one more thing to be taken into consideration."

"What is that, sir?"

"Major Hembold, who should know more of the motives that prompted his daughter in leaving, than any one else, and certainly have some reason for the belief in her kidnapping, has never faltered in his assertion that it is a conspiracy to capture her."

"True, colonel; but suppose we have Jack Crawford come here now and discover from him what prompts Cody's opinion?"

"It will be well, and the major too, poor fellow."

An orderly was at once sent to the quarters of Major Hembold, to request his presence at the colonel's office, and then told to go and tell Jack Crawford to also report to the commandant.

In a short while Major Hembold, pale and haggard-faced, entered and took the seat which Captain Taylor placed for him.

"Major Hembold, with my sanction Captain Taylor wrote a letter to Buffalo Bill, who is absent on a special duty, accompanied by Wild Bill.

"Jack Crawford bore the letter, and Cody was told the exact situation, taking your view of the affair and all.

"His reply Crawford has just returned with, and the captain will read it to you, and then we will hear what the courier has to say of the reason why Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill adopt your idea that Miss Heloise was kidnapped."

"They do believe so, do they?" cried the major, excitedly.

"Yes; but here is the letter."

Captain Taylor read the letter over carefully, and then Major Hembold said, earnestly:

"Thank God that it is so, and that my child did not desert me."

Just then Jack Crawford reported, looking quite fresh after a good meal, short rest and change of clothing.

Without telling him of what Cody's letter said, Colonel Royston asked:

"Well, Crawford, you found the scouts all right?"

"Oh, yes, sir; and, with a pretty landlady and a lovely Gambler Queen, Hallelujah is not such a bad place after all," said the scout, with a sly glance at Captain Taylor, as though he knew that officer understood the situation.

"What have the scouts done in their work?"

"They are beginning, sir, at the right end of the trail, though it is slow work."

"And what had they to say of Miss Hembold's disappearance?"

"Buffalo Bill at once said, sir, that Major Hembold was right, and Wild Bill soon joined him in this belief.

"We talked it over together that night, and I came round to their way of thinking."

"What is Cody's argument in defense of his belief that Miss Hembold was kidnapped?"

"Well, sir, he urged that the letter, forging your writing, to Captain Willis was not the work of a young lady."

"That Miss Heloise often rode off alone from the fort, and had she wished to run away with any one it was easy enough to meet them then and get a night's start."

"He did not believe any strangers had been about the fort, no men were missing, I told him, and so outsiders had done the work."

"It was a bold plan, but it was a successful one, and it had been made to look as though she had gone voluntarily, so as to prevent pursuit."

"He believed the letter left in Miss Hembold's room was a forgery, and, if addressed to her father and placed there early in the afternoon before she went on the coach, how strange an act, when he might have found it five minutes after her departure and readily have overtaken the coach."

"Buffalo Bill said that it would be well to keep an eye upon the man and his wife who are the major's servants, and to compare every letter in the note left in her room with her writing, as also the letter to Captain Willis, pretending to be from the colonel."

"He also said that it might be well for the major to look over all that Miss Heloise left behind her, and see if there were not many things she would have taken had she been going away forever."

"Again he said that perhaps Major Hembold would know if there was any secret or particular reason why any one would seek to kidnap his daughter, for if he did, this would be the strongest clew by which to track the kidnappers—Oh!" and Jack Crawford quickly sprung to the side of Major Hembold, who had fallen back in his chair in a dead faint, as though overcome by the last utterances of the courier scout.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WON OVER.

THE major soon rallied from his fainting turn, and which his loss of rest and grief had brought upon him, though the words of Jack Crawford, as to Buffalo Bill's view of the case of his daughter's disappearance, evidently had something to do with it.

So thought Colonel Royston and Captain Taylor, though they said nothing at the time to show what their suspicions were.

The major said after a moment:

"I believe I am losing my grip, my nerve, for I was never weak this way before."

"You have had much to disturb you, major; but I hope now all will come well in the end, as I have unbounded confidence in Cody," said Colonel Royston.

"As I have, sir, and he agrees with me that my poor child was kidnapped," eagerly said the major.

"Yes, sir," said Courier Crawford, "Buffalo Bill said that perhaps you would know if there was any one who had a motive in kidnapping Miss Heloise."

The courier had spoken as though he had not known that these very words before had caused the major to faint.

But he looked innocently at him, as though expecting an affirmative answer.

The colonel and Captain Taylor, however, had seen that Jack Crawford was probing, and yet they said nothing.

After a moment Major Hembold remarked in a low tone:

"Crawford, Buffalo Bill aimed well when he said that there must be some motive for my child being kidnapped, and that I should know."

"There is a motive, and I do know, but I wish this to go no further."

"The letters, colonel; with your permission, we will now examine, after I have gone to my daughter's room and had a thorough search of them."

With this, the major left headquarters, and half an hour after returned.

Courier Crawford had gone to seek much-needed rest, but Captain Taylor was still with the colonel, and they had been closely examining the forged letter sent to Captain Willis.

"Colonel Royston, I found my daughter's keys in the pocket of a dress she wore the day of her departure, and they let me into her desk, bureau and a trunk."

"A small jewel-case, with what she wished to wear at the post entertainment, went with her and returned on the coach in her box; but all her other jewelry, some important papers, letters, and about six hundred dollars in bank-notes were in a strong box locked in one of the bureau drawers."

"There is evidence that some one has searched through her rooms, but nothing that was locked was disturbed."

"Now, here is the writing-paper from her desk, and envelopes and ink, and you will see, though left in her room, the note to me is in bluish ink, and not written on a piece of paper or put in an envelope similar to what she had."

"Again, by a close study of her handwriting, for here are a number of specimens of it, you can see that this note is an imitation of it, and I would say written by a man."

"Some one in this fort is a spy, and one of her kidnappers, and that one had means of access to her rooms."

"Colonel Royston, more than ever am I convinced that my child never left of her own will, and more, I will say this much in confidence to you and to Captain Taylor."

"My child's mother was a Mexican, and were I willing to give her up to her kindred this day, she would become an heiress, while more, without her consent, or death, the next heirs after her would never be able to touch one dollar of the inheritance, for it would go to the Church in Mexico."

"My child knew all this, and she preferred to be an American, to remain a poor girl, an army officer's daughter, than to go to Mexico and become an heiress."

"Now you know why I dread that she has been kidnapped, and God bless that fellow Buffalo Bill who saw the matter as it really is."

The major's manner had changed, his eyes had brightened and he looked like a different man, now that he knew others believed as he did, and that Buffalo Bill had taken the trail of the mystery to follow it to the end.

"I confess I am completely won over, Major Hembold," said Colonel Royston earnestly.

"As I am, sir, and I congratulate you that Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill have picked up an end of the trail," Captain Taylor rejoined.

"Yes, but we must help them out, so, Captain Taylor, by to-morrow Crawford will be well rested, so take half of your troop and go with him to a spot where you will be within easy reach of Cody should he need you."

"I will, sir, and I only wish we had Surgeon Frank Powell and Texas Jack, to aid the two Bills and Crawford, for those five are worth a regiment of soldiers for secret border work, in fact they are natural detectives."

"They are indeed, Taylor; but we could not

get Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack for days, and so must give them up."

"Now, major, use your own will as to going with Captain Taylor, or not, or leaving the matter in his hands."

"I shall have Captain Willis go, and also Ames, as aides to Captain Taylor, for they have wise heads, and I know that you wish them, captain."

"Indeed I do, sir, and Major Hembold being along as my guest might often give a valuable suggestion, knowing the full situation as he does at both ends of the trails," responded the gallant captain.

"Then I will be ready to start at dawn, but pardon me if I suggest the idea that it be reported that I take the stage East, for to-morrow is coach day, and that Captain Taylor is supposed to go on a scouting expedition to the Indian country, for then the spies that are here will be thrown off their guard."

"Major Hembold, you are yourself again," said the colonel, cheerfully, and so the plan was arranged, both the commandant and Captain Taylor being now firmly convinced that Heloise Hembold had been kidnapped—but by whom.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MIND-READER.

BACK to Hallelujah City I take my reader, upon the day following the departure of Jack Crawford.

Jack Crawford was a man of iron frame and endurance, and he had a horse very much like himself in that respect.

Having seen to the animal's comfort after his arrival at Kate's Kitchen, and given a man a dollar to rub him down for an hour and then feed him, he had sought his own dinner and rest.

That night he and the scouts had had a long talk together, and the courier had gone to rest, while Buffalo Bill had written his letter to Captain Taylor.

Wild Bill, an hour before dawn, had gone out and given Jack's horse a good feed and rubbing down, and the cook had been paid to have a breakfast ready just at daylight for the courier.

So Jack Crawford and his horse, perfectly rested, well fed and anxious for the trail, were on the way back to the fort again before the sun looked over the mountain range down into the valley in which lay Hallelujah City.

The scouts arose later, had breakfast, and mounting their horses, went off for a ride, more to have a talk together where they would be wholly out of earshot of any one else.

The news from the fort had distressed them. They both liked Major Hembold immensely, and remembering the grief of Heloise, if in the power of lawless men, they were anxious to go to her rescue.

Told by Jack Crawford that all at the fort believed Heloise to have run away, it would be a fine feather in their sombreros to prove to the contrary by restoring her to her father.

They were convinced in their own minds that she had been captured to be held for ransom, her kidnappers supposing that a large sum would readily be paid for her restoration.

If such was the case, who but the Toll-Takers of the Trails had been the plotters of the deed?

The scouts were more than ever convinced that they were right in their surmise that Hallelujah City was the head center of the Toll-Takers.

They were not so sure that the two mysterious women, Kate Fenwick and Louise Gray, were not leagued with the outlaws.

Then, too, they held a slight suspicion against the Bravo.

Another thing that bothered them was the presence there just at that time of the old trapper and his Indian pard, and those two worthies really seemed to be "shadowing" them, the scouts.

That no time was to be lost was evident, so the two Bills rode out for a talk, and to plan just how to begin work to get back the missing girl.

They were riding along the valley, plotting and planning, when they came upon Bandbox Bill, mounted upon one of his jet-black horses, and upon his way to the tavern.

He looked as serene as a May morn and as handsome as a picture, and raised his sombrero at meeting them with the courtly manner of a born cavalier.

"I was just going to Kate's Kitchen to see you," he said.

"Is there any way in which I can serve you, sir?" Buffalo Bill asked.

"Oh no, thank you, only I expect to have to go away for a few days, and not knowing how long you would remain in our country, I wished to say good-by and express the hope of meeting you again some time."

"The hope is mutual, I assure you, Bandbox Bill, but I cannot tell how long we will be here, for our movements are uncertain."

"Any news from the fort of late?" asked the Bravo in Broadcloth, looking Buffalo Bill squarely in the eyes.

The scout felt his face flush in spite of himself, but answered:

"Well, yes; a lady friend of ours has run away from her father, we learned."

"Miss Heloise Hembold?"

Wild Bill uttered an oath in a low tone and looked at the Bravo in a way that plainly said: "How the deuce did you know that?"

"Yes, it was Miss Hembold; but may I ask how you knew?"

"I have been to Fort B——, and then I happen to get considerable news floating around; but let me say to you that the lady *did not run away*."

"What?"

And both the scouts asked the question in the same breath.

"I repeat it, Miss Hembold did not go of her own accord, and if you have decided to take the trail to find her, my advice to you is to go into the Valley of the Shadow of Death and seek there the one known as the Woman in Black."

"You will have to surprise her to get within speaking distance, and, as you both throw a lariat well, that might be a good way to catch her horse, once you have found out her haunts and trails."

"She may be able to tell you of Miss Hembold."

"And more, let me suggest that you find some hiding-place for your horses, and do not take them into the Shadow Valley with you, for if so you will be tracked, while on foot you can hide your trail."

"Besides, there is more in the Shadow Valley to fear than you have any idea of, and I am not one to give an idle warning."

The two scouts looked at the Bravo in wonder.

He seemed to be a man who could read their thoughts, and yet that stern, handsome face, with its large, sad, deer-like eyes seemed as hard to read as though carved in stone.

At last Wild Bill blurted out with:

"Who the deuce are you, man?"

The Bravo smiled, and, with no show of anger, responded:

"Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, sir, very much at your service."

"And do you expect us to take your advice?"

"I expect you to do only that which your own good sense prompts you to do."

"I am a mystery to you, I know, as I am to others, and I will prove now by a prediction that I know a great deal of what is going on around me, for you will go on the trail to find Miss Hembold, and, if brought to bay on the track, you will find friends near of whom you little dream."

"You are anxious to hunt down the Toll-Takers, to discover the Woman in Black, and now to find Miss Hembold; so start on the trail to accomplish all."

"Now permit me to add that I knew you believed that I had hanged the man found at my cabin the other night."

"On the contrary I discovered that he was a friend of mine, and had been lassoed and hanged under the impression that it was I, while his murderers, hearing the approach of my horse, fled."

"I have their lariats, however, so know them, and the trail they took is shadowed, for I have doomed them to death."

"But I detain you, so will say farewell, and add, *we shall meet again*."

He raised his sombrero and rode away, leaving the two Bills looking at each other in speechless amazement.

Wild Bill first found utterance, and what he said was to the point:

"Buffalo, that fellow is the devil on horse-back!"

CHAPTER XXX.

KNOWN AND STILL UNKNOWN.

THERE were two individuals at Kate's Kitchen who were by no means unobservant beholders of what was going on about them.

They had seen the arrival of Jack Crawford, whom both knew, and they had seen him depart at early dawn.

These two were Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack.

They had a room in the rear wing of the hotel, and they kept their eyes open upon the fair landlady, Gambler Lou, and the frequenters of the place.

But they were more particular in their attention to the two scouts.

They were determined that neither Buffalo Bill nor Wild Bill should slip away without their knowing it.

A close was their observance of the movements of the two scouts that the latter began to feel that the old trapper and the Sioux chief, as they believed them to be, were watching them.

There was another person too whom the two disguised men were anxious to know more about, and that was the Bravo in Broadcloth.

They had discovered that the two men, over whom he held some strange secret power, had really gone away from Hallelujah City, left by the command of a man who had shown himself their master.

The gang, too, of Six-Shooter Sam, who had accepted Giant Bruce as a second leader, had been remarkably quiet the next night in the saloon of the Queen of Hearts, and this surely had some meaning in the minds of men who read every sign as did Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack.

They could of course have made themselves known to Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill, well knowing that the scouts would only be too happy to have them as allies.

But they decided that they could aid them the more by remaining unknown, and yet would be close on their trail when they left the mining-camps.

That Jack Crawford had brought important tidings from the fort they were assured, and they were anxious to know if anything had gone wrong, yet were unable to find any means to find out.

When the Two Bills rode away that morning Surgeon Powell from behind his blanket, which hung against the window overlooking the stable-yard, saw that they did not depart on a trail, as they left their traps behind them.

Still, they must know which way they were going, so they soon after mounted their horses and rode out up the valley.

They saw from a distance the two scouts meet Bandbox Bill and have a talk with him, and when he left them he came directly toward the surgeon and Texas Jack.

"Well, my friend, you and your Indian pard are not leaving Hallelujah City, certainly?"

"No, Pard Stranger, we is jist a-knockin' around a leetle," responded Texas Jack.

"Well, I feel a friendly interest in you both, from the very plucky manner in which you stepped to my side against odds the other night, and I wish you well."

"Tuankee, pard; but I seen yer a-talkin' to them two fine scouts jist now; be they goin' away from Hallelujah?"

"I think so; and it might be well for you to follow their trail."

"Lordy, pard, we hain't got nothin' ag'in' 'em."

"No, but they are going to take a rather dangerous trip up into the Shadow Valley country."

"Whew! whar thet Woman in Black hangs out?"

"Yes, and as they may have a number of enemies, some of whom might get behind them and do them harm, it would be a good thing to have two such good friends as you and Red Chief are, to keep just out of sight behind them."

"You might camp on their trail, and be ready to help them in time of need."

Texas Jack gave a hasty glance at his companion and said cautiously:

"Yer seems ter think we is bosom pards o' them two Bills."

"Yes, I have got that idea, I confess."

"Hain't yer a leetle off ther trail, pard?"

"Let us see if I am. You came from Fort L— on a secret mission."

"Who ther mischief says we did?"

"I do."

"Waal?"

"You went into the Shadow Valley country, and but for the warning of the Woman in Black you would now be dead men."

"Lordy!"

"You came here to throw your enemies off your trail, that you might get another chance to enter the Shadow Valley, solve the mystery about the Woman in Black and also get at the fact of who the chief of the Toll-Takers is, and how you can track him and his men to death."

"Pard, yer is eddicated complete, or yer thinks so," and Texas Jack did not dare glance toward Surgeon Powell, whose face was as emotionless as marble, and who appeared not to understand a word that was said.

"I know more," was the quiet reply.

"Give it to us, pard."

"I will merely say, Texas Jack, that the disguise of yourself and Surgeon Frank Powell is complete."

"You know us, then?" almost gasped the Texan, in his amazement.

"I do."

"Then Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill have known us all along and have told you," Surgeon Powell said, calmly.

"Not so, they do not know you."

"It must be, for how would you do so?"

"As I knew that you had left Fort L—, that you had gone into the Shadow Valley and were warned of danger by the Woman in Black—as I know that you had better take my advice and follow the trail of your two friends when they leave, still remaining unknown to them, and not letting them suspect that you are following them."

"But why should we follow them?"

"Because, Texas Jack, as I said, you may be able to keep bitter foes off their trail, and more, they will lead you right to where you wish to go, into the Shadow Valley and four men are better than two especially four such men as you are."

"Be-ides, you have already had proof that the Woman in Black is friendly to you."

"Shall I give you another good reason?"

"Have you another?"

"Yes; the daughter of Major Hembold, of Fort B—, has been kidnapped by Toll-Takers, at least so it is thought, and the two scouts are going to rescue her—if they can."

"Then go we do, for I know the major and his beautiful daughter well; but may I ask who you are, sir?" and Surgeon Powell gazed fixedly into the face of the mysterious man.

"Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, sir—until you know me better."

"Good-evening, gentlemen," and the strangest of strange men raised his sombrero and rode on his way, leaving the amazed friends gazing after him, too much astonished to utter a word.

CHAPTER XXXI. SELF-BETRAYED.

A WOMAN on horseback in a scene that was wild, desolate and lonely in the extreme.

A woman riding along a ridge, sheltered by a growth of pines, and yet pausing now and then to glance down into the valley where two horsemen were visible coming toward a canyon which cut the range in twain.

The woman was mounted upon a horse as black as ink, and her saddle, bridle and trappings were of the same somber hue.

Her form was elegant, her seat in the saddle perfect, and yet there was something weird about her appearance.

Her habit was jet-black, her sombrero and gloves also, while her face was as white as snow, and really seemed to be whitened, so like a lily was her complexion.

Had not the face been of such ghastly hue and so surrounded by black, it would have been beautiful; but as it was, it looked like a face cut in marble, and about the large eyes was a look that was weird.

Her age it was hard to tell, also on account of this coffin-like surroundings of the face of white and black, and she might be twenty, perhaps ten years older.

Halting her horse by a low-spoken word, she leveled a glass at the two horsemen and said:

"Yes, they are strangers, and I must meet them, for, once they pass into this canyon, it will be like Dante's Inferno—to leave all hope behind."

So saying she turned away from the top of the ridge and rode down a trail leading to the valley.

After a ride of a mile perhaps, she entered the narrow canyon, where were overhanging cliffs, huge boulders and patches of timber.

It was a pass which a score of men could defend against hundreds.

At length she halted behind a large boulder which had dashed down from the mountain above.

Upon the other side was another rock of equal size, and the two stood like giant sentinels to guard the canyon, the pass between them being but twenty feet wide.

There the woman sat upon her horse behind the rock on the right, and so still was the animal and the rider, they appeared like an ebony statue.

Up the canyon came the two men who had attracted her attention, and they had in the lead a pack-horse.

On they came, slowly and cautiously, and as they reached the narrow pass between the two rocks the woman rode out before them.

Both men drew rein and dropped their hands upon their revolvers.

But her right hand was raised, and weaponless, and she cried:

"Hold, men! I mean you no harm!"

"Yer sprung yerself upon us kinder too sudden, miss, and mighty nigh got a leetle lead, for which I are glad ter say yer didn't git a dose of fer it are onhealthy medicine."

"Hed we seen yer at night, its mighty nigh probable we'd hev lit out pretty peert, takin' yer fer a ghost, which yer don't look onlike."

"Be yer the Woman in Black, o' ther Shadder Valley, of whom we hes heerd so much?"

"I am, and I came to warn you not to enter the valley, for your lives will be the forfeit."

"There is death before you," was the impressive warning.

"Waal, thar is death abind us; but why doesn't yer want us ter enter ther valley?"

"Because the Toll-Takers never show mercy to an honest man, and you would both be murdered and robbed."

"Heed my warning and go back, for the Toll-Takers may come this way at any time."

"Hain't you ther Woman in Black?"

"I am so called."

"Well, we has heerd yer were a pard o' ther Toll-Takers?"

"Unfortunately, yes; but I wish no life on my hands that I can save."

"Will you go back?"

"Not adzactly, for we hain't honest men, me and my pard both."

"This are my pard, Giant Bruce, and I be Six-Shooter Sam, late o' Hallelujah City, and we is going ter jine ther Toll-Takers, seein' as how it are onhealthy fer us back whar we come from."

"My God! I have betrayed myself!" broke from the woman's lips in bitter accents of regret.

"Waal, it do seem so, and as we wants ter stand solid with ther Toll-Takers, we'll jist carry yer inter camp and tell 'em how we saved 'em from bein' roped in some day by a woman as they had trust in, but who are a snake in the'r bosoms."

"You is our prisoner, miss!" and the revolver of Six-Shooter Sam covered the woman's heart, while Giant George spurred forward and grasped her hands with a grip she was powerless to shake off, had she tried to do so.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TWO PRISONERS.

THAT the Woman in Black was surely caught there was no doubt.

The two men who had come upon her in the canyon, unheeding the kindness which had prompted her warning of danger, believing them to be honest miners out prospecting, were determined to make use of this very act of hers for their own advantage.

What would be done with her they neither knew nor cared, so that it gave them a standing with the outlaws to report her act of treachery.

Six-Shooter Sam and Giant Bruce, after their flight from the cabin of the Bravo, had decided upon casting their lot with the Toll-Takers.

They were thoroughly acquainted with the miners of Hallelujah, and how much had been laid up in dust, and they were anxious to get the outlaws to raid the place.

Saturday night they knew was the time of the greatest debauch, and the miners were nearly all in an unfit condition for resistance before twelve o'clock, so that a determined band of outlaws could sweep down upon the valley under their guidance, raid the stores, hotel, saloons and cabins, and be far away before dawn.

The result would be a large sum in money, more in gold-dust, quantities of plunder, and many valuable horses.

Feeling that they had slain the Bravo, the two treacherous desperadoes held no fear of others at the mining-camps, and were anxious to curry favor with the outlaws with whom they were to cast their lots.

They had reached the Shadow Valley, and were congratulating themselves upon the fact, when they came upon the Woman in Black.

Finding that she was in their power the woman wisely made no resistance, uttered no outcry, but was ready to accompany them, be their fate what it might.

But suddenly from the cliff overhanging the canyon, came two dark coils, and settling over the heads of the desperadoes they tightened around their necks and instantly they were dragged from their saddles up into the air.

Upon the cliff were two horsemen who had thrown the lariats, and their horses, standing near, had moved off at a command and thus drawn the men into mid-air.

Then, down the lariat around the neck of Six-Shooter Sam, the form of a man came hand under hand, the horse on the cliff standing braced against the double weight.

He paid no attention to the Woman in Black, who quickly rode away, but called out to his comrade on the cliff, who at once led the horse forward a dozen steps, and the form of Six-Sam was lowered to the ground.

To securely bind him hands and feet was an instant's work, and then the same performance was gone through with again with Giant Bruce.

The one who did his work so rapidly and well was an Indian, and one whom the reader has before seen, for it was Panther Foot.

With a strength that was surprising the Panther Foot then raised the two desperadoes to their saddles and bound them there, after which he led their horses and the pack-animals down the canyon at a rapid pace.

The whole performance had not taken over ten minutes, for the Indian seemed anxious to get away from the canyon.

At its mouth he was joined by Night Eye, his comrade, with their horses, and the two rode into a thick growth of timber and halted upon the banks of a small stream.

Here the two desperadoes were brought around from their severe choking, and they realized that they were the prisoners of two Indians whom they had often seen in Hallelujah City.

It was some time before either of the desperadoes could speak, for, the lariats had drawn taut, and a few more minutes of choking would have ended their lives; but at last Six-Shooter Sam growled out:

"Say, Injuns, what does this mean?"

"Don't know," was Panther Foot's laconic response.

"Waal, yer'll know ef I kin git my grip on yer."

Six-Shooter Sam realized his mistake in the utterance at once, for Panther Foot said something to Night Eye in their own language, and the two got a lariat and far more securely bound the hands of the desperadoes around them.

Then they were told to mount their horses, the Indians standing ready to aid them, having

led the horses up to a bank to make it easier for them to get into the saddle.

"No!" said Six-Shooter Sam, firmly.

Panther Foot took out his knife, grasped the ear of the desperado, and said:

"Git on horse, or Panther Foot cut ear off."

The desperado obeyed, for he saw that Giant George had quickly mounted before Night Eye could fasten onto his ear.

Their feet were then bound securely under their horses, with the pack animals in the center, tied together, after which the Indians mounted their ponies and moved off on the trail they had come from Hallelujah City.

This startled the two desperadoes half out of their wits, and they began to beg not to be taken back to the mines.

Then they swore vigorously, threatened, and at last tried to buy their freedom.

But all was useless.

"It's because we hanged ther Bravo, pard," groaned Six-Shooter Sam.

"Yes; ther miners sent these reds arter us, and we is ter be hanged," was the whining response.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DOOMED.

THE Indians camped with their prisoner just at sunset.

The camping-place was well chosen, up in the head of a false canyon.

The spot was a pretty one, an acre in size, with a sod of velvety grass, some timber, and a rivulet trickling down from the mountains.

The prisoners were aided to dismount and then placed near a fire, which one of the redskins soon had blazing cheerily.

The other staked out the horses and then took provisions from the pack of the prisoners and their own supply, along with some steaks of a deer they had killed that afternoon.

One arm of a prisoner was released at a time, so that they might eat their supper, and while they did so the redskins sat before them with their revolvers in hand.

"Whar is yer ter take us, Panther?" asked Six-Shooter Sam, after he had finished his supper and was again securely bound.

"To Ha-loo-jah Cit," was the reply.

"What for?"

"Get kill, guess."

"Lordy! what hev we ever did to you?"

"No do nothin'; won't do nothin'."

"We'll give you all our money and traps if you will let us go."

"Got 'em now."

"You intend to rob us then, you red sarpints?"

"Yes, maybe; dead man don't want gun, and money and blanket."

"Injun live long time want all."

"Oh, you red cusses!"

"Well, take 'em all and let us go."

"No, keep bad man and all."

"Giant, does yer hear thet?"

"I hears him."

"What kin we do?"

"I'm durned ef I knows, pard."

"I guesses we hed jist as well begin ter repent."

The two prisoners were soon after taken to their blankets, and their feet were bound together by their cautious captors.

Then Panther Foot went away on foot, while Night Eye rolled himself in his blanket and laid down not far away.

"Thet varmint hain't asleep, Giant."

"What ef he were? We c'u'dn't do nothin'."

"Thet's so," and they soon sunk to sleep.

For an hour or more they slumbered quietly, and then Six-Shooter Sam awoke with a yell that startled Giant Bruce terribly and caused Night Eye to spring to his feet.

"Oh, Lordy! Giant, I seen him, I seen him!"

"Seen who, yer fool?"

"The Bravo! ther Man in Broadcloth! See thar! thar he is now!"

And Giant Bruce, looking toward the fire, beheld the tall form of the Man in Broadcloth standing by the fire.

Night Eye laid down again in his blankets, while Panther Foot was seen to be busy boiling some coffee.

"It are he, and no mistake."

"But does ghosts git hungry?" said Giant Bruce, his eyes riveted upon the tall form.

"Pard, thet hain't no ghost! oh, no, we didn't do our work well," growled Six-Shooter Sam.

The object of their conversation meanwhile calmly sat down upon a saddle and ate his supper.

It was the Bravo, that was certain, and he had come into the camp with Panther Foot a few minutes before.

Night Eye had been on the alert, but seeing who it was had gone back to his slumber, until Six-Shooter Sam aroused him with his yell of fright.

Having finished his supper the Bravo spread his blankets and sought rest, as did Panther Foot also, while Night Eye arose and went down the canyon to stand guard.

Neither of the desperadoes again slept.

Two hours passed, and the Bravo arose.

It was just midnight, he saw by looking at his watch, and he gave a low whistle.

Panther Foot was at once upon his feet, and Night Eye soon came in from his guard duty.

A word to the Indians and the two prisoners were brought before him, and their arms unbound.

"Men, you see I am not dead, for you lassoed and hanged the wrong man."

"You know your doom, and I give you your choice of the two deaths which are put down for your punishment, as traitors, deserters, and attempt to kill one of your brotherhood."

"One death is to burn at the stake, and the other is to dig your own graves, lie down in them and take your own lives."

"Mercy! oh, mercy!" cried Six-Shooter Sam, in a broken voice, while Giant Bruce groaned in anguish of heart.

"You well know that it is not for me to be merciful."

"In your creed mercy is unknown."

"Which death would you prefer to die?"

Groans only were the answer, and after a minute the Bravo said:

"Yonder are two trees, and these Indians know their duty and will not flinch from doing it."

"Shall it be by fire?"

"No, oh no!" cried Six-Shooter Sam.

"For God's sake, no!" moaned Giant Bruce.

"Then you are to dig your own graves and take your own lives."

"You brought upon your pack-horse picks and shovels."

"Begin your work within five minutes," and the Bravo took out his watch.

Down upon their knees sunk the two men, groveling in abject fright and appalled by the doom before them.

The two Indians stood upon either side, their rifles in hand and ready.

In front, upright, merciless, stood the tall form of Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth.

Prayers, pleadings from the lips of the two men were in vain, for the stern face before them was unmoved, and at last came the words:

"Why cringe like cowards, when you know it is not for me to be merciful!"

"Be men, and die like men, not like cringing curs."

"Your time is up! Begin your work of death!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BANDBOX BILL AGAIN "CHIPS IN."

THE meeting of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill with the Bravo set the two scouts to thinking.

He certainly appeared to be friendly to them, and they owed to him their lives.

They had, as he had been glad to acknowledge, returned the compliment in their service rendered him, and he had just given them advice and warning.

But, was it in good faith?

They hardly knew, for the man was such a mystery as to be unreadable.

He was going away, he had said.

Where, and for what purpose?

"It would be our chance, Wild Bill, to take his trail, if we did not have to look for that poor young lady, Miss Heloise."

"You are right, Buffalo; but maybe by following his trail it might lead us to where she is."

"Ah! you still cling to the idea that the Bravo is in some way connected with the Toll-Takers?"

"Well, if he is not, what is he?"

"He is past finding out; but glance over your shoulder and you will see that he is talking to that old trapper and his Indian pard."

"You are right; but I wonder if they were dogging us?"

"They keep a close eye on us, Bill."

"They do, indeed; and I wonder why?"

"I cannot tell, I am sure; but who can they be?"

"Don't know; maybe Toll-Takers."

"It may be; but they were on the side of the Bravo the other night."

"Somehow I feel as though I had met them both before, and yet I cannot recall when and where."

"If I really felt they were shadowing us, I would stop and know just why."

"The old fellow would look innocent, as he always does, the red-skin would put on the appearance of a bronze statue, and what could we do?"

"Nothing, I suppose; but they are having quite a confidential chat with the Bravo."

The scouts continued their ride for a few miles and then returned to the hotel.

They found the trapper and Red Chief already there, looking as innocent as ever.

Lady Kate was in her little parlor, just after supper, and Lady Lou was preparing to go into the saloon and deal faro.

The scouts were asked to enter, and Buffalo Bill said:

"We have decided to go on a little prospect-

ing tour, Lady Kate, but hope to see you again, and wish to thank you for your kindness to us and pay our score."

"Are you going so soon?"

"We wish to be in the saddle by dawn."

"I am sorry to have you go, for it is a relief to have some one around who is not lawless."

"You ought not to remain among such a lawless lot, neither of you."

"Ah me! perhaps not; but I am making money, and hope to put it to good use some day, so put up with much now for the sake of the future."

"As I do; but this life will not last always," Lady Lou said, in an absent kind of a way.

"Well, we leave you a good protector in the Bravo, should you need one," Buffalo Bill suggested, as a means of getting them to say more of Bandbox Bill.

"We see little of him, as he is away often; but we have no personal fears for ourselves, for lawless as these men are, they consider themselves individually our protectors."

"Yes, I have observed that; but is Bandbox Bill a miner, Lady Kate?"

"Like himself, his affairs are unknown," was the quiet answer, and neither Buffalo Bill or Wild Bill could detect in the faces of the women that they knew more of the Bravo than they admitted.

Having paid their bills, the scouts asked that no mention be made of their going away, and that night they appeared in the saloon of the Queen of Hearts.

Lady Kate was there as usual, and Lady Lou had her place at the faro-bank and was dealing.

A number of players were about the table, as neither of the two ringleaders of mischief and invariable winners, Six-Shooter Sam and Giant Bruce, were present.

Neither Texas Jack nor Surgeon Powell had been in the saloon when the scouts entered, but they came in soon after and took a seat near the faro-table, apparently interested in the game.

Wild Bill whispered to Buffalo Bill:

"Our shadows were not long behind us."

"You slip out quietly and go over to the hotel, and then return, and I will see if you are followed."

Buffalo Bill did so, watching his chance and getting out when he thought he was unobserved.

When Wild Bill, who had stepped up to the faro-table to play, for he was fond of a game always, looked again over where Texas Jack and Surgeon Powell had been seated, he observed that the latter had gone.

In twenty minutes Buffalo Bill returned, and stepping to the side of Wild Bill said:

"I saw nothing of them."

"The red followed you all the same—see, he has just slipped back to his place."

"That settles it then, they are shadowing us, and we had better say something to-night to Lady Lou, so they can hear, of playing her for heavy stakes to-morrow night."

"Yes, it is a good idea," and Wild Bill began to play, and his bets were always large ones.

But he lost steadily, and after awhile said with a laugh:

"You have my luck to-night, Lady Lou; but to-morrow night I'll break your bank."

"Certainly, sir; but forewarned is forearmed you know."

"I'll try a game with some gentleman present, if I can find one willing to play," and Wild Bill looked over the crowd.

"I are thet gent every time, pard," and Buzz Saw stepped forward.

"I play fer big stakes remember."

"I hes ther dust, so go ahead," and they sat down to a table to play.

Buffalo Bill stood behind his friend, and he noticed that the strange pair, whom they had begun to refer to as White and Red, took a position near him, while the Buzz Saw gang filed behind their comrade.

Wild Bill's luck seemed to have left him, for he lost steadily, and the bets were as high as a hundred dollars upon the turn of a card.

Buffalo Bill knew Wild Bill's nature was never to give up while he had a dollar, so he wished to give him a hint that their money might be needed, when up to the table glided the Bravo.

"Pardon me, Mr. Hikok, for interfering with your game; but how much have you lost to this man?"

"Are thet your business, Bandbox Bill?" growled Buzz Saw.

"It seems I am making it my business, Buzz Saw."

"Will you answer my question, Wild Bill?"

"A trifle over eight hundred," was the reply.

"Well, of course Buzz Saw will save trouble by returning you your money, for he has been putting up counterfeit bills."

"I say it's a—"

But the hand of the Bravo dropped upon the throat of the man with a force that made his teeth rattle; and he said sternly:

"You received by the coach to-day a package of counterfeit bills to pass off in the mines for good money, on shares."

"Hand over the good money you won to Wild Bill, and give up the packages of counterfeits to me—Steady, gentlemen, don't draw on me, if you value your lives!" and the last remark was addressed to the comrades of Buzz Saw, who were threatening trouble.

"Let 'em draw ef they wants ter, pard, for me and Red Chief is with yer," cried the supposed trapper, and Wild Bill said:

"I am with you, sir, too, if they cause trouble; but there is no mistake, you think, about this man's money, for it looks genuine?"

"Oh, yes, it looks genuine, but is counterfeit."

"You have your money back?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Now, George Jessup, alias Buzz Saw, you are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner? You hain't no power ter take me."

"Show yer warrant!" yelled the desperado.

"Here it is, all in good order—come!"

He flashed a revolver in the face of the man with one hand, while with a dexterity that was marvelous he slipped a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of his prisoner with the other.

"Say, pards, I calls on you!" yelled Buzz Saw.

"So do I, not to interfere!" came the stern rejoinder, and Buzz Saw was dragged out of the saloon, while the crowd who would have followed shrunk back under the ringing command:

"Back! all of you!"

"Pard Buffalo."

"Yes, Wild Bill."

"Bandbox Bill shows another side to his character."

"Yes; and one equally hard to comprehend; but listen to those coyotes talk now."

Buffalo Bill regretted his words, for instantly Wild Bill called out:

"Hold on, you cowardly coyotes, slandering a man behind his back, for I will not tolerate it!"

The gang of Buzz Saw turned upon the speaker, but not to act, for there stood Wild Bill smiling and ready, with Buffalo Bill by his side cool and unmoved, and the two disguised friends silent, watchful, and ready to "chip in" if necessary.

The quartet looked too dangerous, and the Buzz-Saw gang subsided.

CHAPTER XXXV.

KEEN KIT'S UNWILLING PASSENGER.

MY readers will recall Kit Keene, whose name was reversed to Keen Kit, besides having the name of Old Owl-Eyes given to him.

Kit's adventure will be remembered when he took the warning of the Woman in Black and went by a most perilous trail to avoid the road running through one end of the Shadow Valley, which was the direct run of the Overland coaches.

Kit had had so many adventures upon the road that he had come to look upon danger as a daily occurrence, and he was ever ready to face everything that came up before him in the discharge of his duties.

He had the end of the run some twenty miles out of Hallelujah City, picking up any passengers that came from that delectable place, and also that came in on another line down from Rock Outpost.

His coach often ran light, but again he would have a crowded trip of it.

But upon the morning when he is again brought to the reader's notice he was going along the trail with an empty coach.

The driver had several times been to Hallelujah City, when he had been forced to drive on to the terminus from the sudden death or an accident befalling some driver.

He knew the inner deviltry of Hallelujah City well, and much of the people.

He rather liked the run on there oftentimes, for it gave him a rest of several days, and he had never discovered which he admired most, Kate's Kitchen, or the pretty landlady herself.

He had heard much of the Bravo in Black, but never had seen him, as upon each of Keen Kit's visits that strange personage happened to be away.

With all his courage Kit was a prudent man, and so when one morning he had gotten five miles away from his starting-point, he beheld a horseman in the trail ahead of him, he did not attempt to ride over him, though he had an idea that he was a road-agent.

"Waal, I've got a empty hearse, and no money o' my own ter speak of, so it can't go very bad," he muttered.

"That are ther trim o' ther Woman in Black, only it's a man," he added as he drew nearer to the horseman, who sat motionless in his saddle.

As the coach drew near he drew no weapon, but simply held up his right hand and Keen Kit drew rein, moving on slowly until he came close alongside the horseman.

"Waal, pard, yer is as gentle as a suckin' dove in yer way o' haltin' me; but it allus makes me think as how when a man are real quiet he hev considerable ter back him."

"You take me for a road-agent then?"

"That same I does."

"I halted you to send a passenger through on your coach."

"Ah! whar be he?"

"I wish you to transfer him from coach to coach and make each man receipt for him."

"Yer talks as though he were a bag o' dust."

"He is equally as precious, and if he escapes, the man who has him in charge at the time will be held responsible."

"Who'll he be responsible to?"

"To me."

"Pard, excuse me, but I hasn't ther honor o' your acquaintance."

"In Hallelujah City they call me Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth."

"Pard, I is glad ter know yer, fer I hev heard o' you many times."

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Kit Keene, for I know you to be one of the pluckiest and squarest men that drive the Overland."

"Yer does know me?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I doesn't remember seein' yer before, much as I hes heard tell on yer."

"I have seen you often, however; but you are going with an empty stage, I see."

"Yas; folks is skeert ter ride nowadays, unless they has ter."

And Kit gazed with real admiration at the strange man, of whom he had heard so much, and he did not forget that he had also heard that he was the secret chief of the Toll-Takers of the Trails.

"Well, I wish you to take my man through, and here is the money to pay his way through and buy him food to Omaha, and there you will deliver him—or the driver on that end of the run will—to the man whose name is on this letter; and the letter is to go, too."

And the Bravo handed a letter up to Kit, who said:

"I understands, Mister Bandbox Bill; but whar are ther gent? or maybe it be a grizzly yer is sendin' through as a pet to a parson ter frighten leetle Sunday school kids with by illustratin' thet Bible story o' ther bald-head man an' ther she b'ars."

The stern face of the Bravo brightened up with a smile at Kit's suggestion, but he answered:

"No, he is no bear; but if you are attacked by road-agents or a rescue is attempted, I give you authority to kill him."

"Whew!"

Then the Bravo gave a peculiar whistle, and out of the timber, where he had been concealed by some bowlders, came a horse, a perfect match of the one he rode.

There was a rider on his back, too, as well as a pack-saddle, but the animal did not seem to care for the extra weight.

The rider's appearance surprised Kit, for he had seen him in Hallelujah City.

"This is my man, Kit Keene, and he is, as you see, in irons, and I will make him fast to the box-rail with this chain and give you the keys."

The man was Buzz Saw, pale, haggard-faced and nervous.

The Bravo aided his prisoner to mount the box, locked the chain about the rail, so as to prevent an escape, and handed the keys over with a roll of money to Kit, who drove off upon his way once more, while Bandbox Bill, followed by his other horse, rode back into the timber as the coach disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BUZZ SAW PLAYS TO WIN.

KIT KEENE was interested in his prisoner, as well as in the one who had placed him in his keeping.

He had heard of Buzz Saw as a very hard citizen in Hallelujah City, and his badly scarred face did not improve his appearance.

Why had the Bravo turned him over to him to carry through?

What right had Bandbox Bill to put a man in irons and ship him through like freight on an Overland coach?

As he could not answer these questions Kit did not worry about guessing, so turned to his prisoner.

"Well, pard, you is in hard luck, I take it?"

"I are in very bad luck; but it will be all right when I has my say."

"What are ther matter atween you an' ther Bravo?"

"Waal, he says I is guilty o' crimes which I is innocent of, and he jist clapped me in irons and sends me through to Omaha."

"What right had he to put you in irons?"

"He held a gun to my head."

"Waal, thet were a durned good argiment, my friend; but hev he the power ter arrest yer?"

"Pard, thet man are playin' two games."

"He are pretendin' ter be huntin' outlaws, and he are in reality the King Bee o' 'em all."

"He accuses me o' bein' a outlaw and sends me through ter prison, and yet I'll tarn informer and give ther whole truth, fer I doesn't intend ter hang."

"No, it hain't a pleasant way o' passin' in yer chips; but will they believe you?"

"I has ther proof."

"Then you is loaded fer b'ar?"

"I is."

"Does yer know who this Bandbox Bill be?"

"He are a outlaw."

"I see."

"Hes yer ever heard o' Major Mephisto?"

"Waal, now, I hev, oftener than I hes a long-in' ter."

"Waal, he are thet man."

"No! if I'd 'a' knowd it, I'd hev jist played a leetle game o' hands-up with him."

"Waal, next time yer meets him jist kill him, fer he are thet man."

"Thar is a big price on his head, pard."

"Yes, and he are wu'th every dollar of it."

"I dare say."

"Now, pard, I hev give yer a pointer, so let me give yer another."

"Yas."

"I are a detective."

"No!"

"I are, and thar is whar I hev Bandbox Bill dead to rights."

"Yer will hev, yer means, fer jist now he hev ther grip on you."

"Yas, but you must let me go."

"I can't do it, pard."

"I are a Rocky Mountain detective, I tells yer."

"Waal, maybe you is when yer is a-runnin' 'round loose, but jist now yer is overland freight paid through."

"Don't yer intend ter let me go?"

"I doesn't."

"I'll tell yer what I'll do."

"Yas."

"I hes got a pile o' money with me."

"Waal?"

"Just run yer hand up under ther back o' my coat on either shoulder-blade."

"It are done."

"Thar is a pocket on the inside o' my coat on either side."

"I feels 'em."

"Draw ther paper dust out o' one."

Kit obeyed and found a package of new bank-bills of the denomination of tens and twenties.

"Thar is two thousand in thet pile, Pard Driver."

"Yer don't say."

"Yas, and t'other package hes got three thousand more."

"Yer is well heeled with greenbacks, pard."

"You bet; but I'll jist tarn over to you one thousand dollars ef yer'll onlock my irons and let me tell you good-by."

"No, pard."

"Call it ther small package."

"No."

"Call it ther big package, then."

"No."

"Then say both of 'em."

"I'll tell yer one thing, pard, and thet are I never hits a man when he are down; but ef yer were free from them irons and offered ter pay me ter go ag'in' my duty, I'd treat yer so mean thet yer face w'd look a heap more like a grizzly hed chawed enter it then it donow."

"I are a poor man, hevin' only my Overland pay and a leetle I kin win now and then at playin' poker with ther boys; but thar hain't money enough ever gone through on my coach thet c'u'd tempt me ter do a mean act or go back on my duty, and ef yer was innercent as a child, yer'd hev ter go through as far as I goes, and prove it ter them as c'u'd set yer free."

"Don't talk to me, pard, fer yer hev got me mad clean through."

Buzz Saw subsided, and when Kit Keene turned him over to the next man at the end of his run, he told his fellow-driver that he must expect to be bribed by the prisoner, and to look out for him.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BUZZ SAW'S LAST CHANCE.

THE Overland Trail followed by the coaches of the company, at the time of which I write, made what the drivers called a horseshoe bend from Kit Keene's western starting-point to the second run from there, going a long way around and yet coming back again, until the two trails were not over forty miles apart at one place.

This was done partially on account of the mountain difficulties to get over, and partially to touch certain camps and outposts.

The driver who took Buzz Saw from the hands of Kit Keene was a sturdy fellow, true as steel, and when Kit gave him the tip that he might be offered a price to release the prisoner, he was not surprised when that offer came.

Of course Buzz Saw had the same story to tell, and the old driver listened in silence.

Then came the request to get his money out of his pocket, which had not been returned to the two receptacles in the back of his coat, however.

"What does yer want with yer money?" said Monk, the driver.

"Thar hain't no stores in these mountings."

"No, but I wishes ter place jist one thousand dollars in yer hands ter hev yer let me go."

"Pard, does yer see this?" and the revolver of

the driver was put close to the face of the prisoner.

"Yas."

"Waal, ef yer hints ag'in thet I are fer sale I'll jist set yer free sart'in, at least thet part o' yer ther parsons calls ther sperrit."

This settled it with Buzz Saw as far as Driver Monk was concerned, and he remained quiet the rest of the run.

The "horseshoe" had nearly been made when at a relay station a passenger got aboard as an inside passenger.

He was a heavily-bearded man, in red woolen shirt, corduroy pants, top-boots, and a slouch hat.

He had a rifle, a belt about his waist with a bowie-knife and one revolver, and carried strapped to his back quite a heavy pack.

He looked like a man who had been roughing it for some time, but he spoke with an accent which, with his pack, caused Monk to set him down as a peddler.

"How mooch monies, mine fri'nt, for me to ride mit t'e coach to Omaha?" he asked.

Monk told him and the amount was taken out of a well-filled purse, and paid over, and then he said:

"I was go to Omahas to puy more goots, mine fri'nt."

Monk told him to jump in and away the coach rolled once more on its run.

Fifteen miles further on Monk turned his prisoner, passenger and freight over to another driver, to whom he gave the same advice as to Buzz Saw, which he had received from Kit Keene.

He got the driver to receipt for the prisoner, and muttered to himself as the coach rolled away:

"Maybe Ben Haws is honest, and maybe he hain't."

"I dislikes ter misjedge a man, but he hain't my kind o' a pard, and it do seem ter me thet ef thet prisoner offers him a heap o' dust, why, somebody will be missin' from ther coach at the end o' Ben Haws's run."

"Waal, I hev my receipt, so I are clear."

Ben Haws was a young man, and he looked like a sport.

He was a good driver, in one way, but pushed his cattle too hard and was fond of "showing off" when he had any one on the box with him.

Buzz Saw took him in at a glance.

He was the more careful to study his face since his rebuff from Kit Keene and Monk.

He did not wish to make another mistake.

So he began by complimenting Ben Haws upon his driving, and said:

"I'm something of a driver myself, but you handle ther reins better than any one I ever seen afore."

"Keen Kit are a good one, and Monk hain't bad; but, pard, you does drive ter suit me, and I are almost sorry, fer ef yer was a keerless hand with ther ribbons yer might upset and kill me, and I w'u'd be glad."

"Glad to be killed?" asked Haws.

"Yas."

"Why?"

"Doesn't yer see me in irons?"

"Yes; going to jail, I suppose?"

"Pard, I are in hard luck, fer I am as inner-cent as a babe."

"Yer see, I are a Rocky Mountain detective, and I hed about arranged ter corral Major Mephisto and his gang o' Toll-Takers, when they got me accused o' robbery, and had me arrested and sent through as yer see me."

"Now, it are ridiculous ter accuse me o' robbery when I has dead boodles o' dust, and it were did fer a purpose."

"Ef I was free, I c'u'd go back and bag ther chief and ther whole lot o' 'em, and it's a clear reward from ther Government, ther miners and ther stage company of twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Of course I'll be set free soon as I gits ter Omaha, but it will be too late then."

"That is too bad."

"Sart'in it are; but to accuse me o' robbery when I hev got thousands with me, give me ter spend in ther captiv' o' ther Toll-Takers."

"You've got thousands with you?"

"Yas; and I'll tell you what I'll do!"

"Well?"

"If I corrals ther Toll-Takers I gits all ther reward, and I kin do it ef I gits away now, so I don't mind giving you a thousand down ter unlock my irons and set me free."

"A thousand dollars is a great deal of money, but I'll lose my place if I let you go."

"Say as how I struck yer in ther head, when yer was going down ther mountains, and stunned yer, so I got ther keys out o' yer pocket and set myself free."

"The Jew peddler would know better."

"Durn him, he won't know nothin', fer I'll jist put a revolver onter him and make him light out on ther trail, yer see."

"One thousand dollars?"

"Yes, and you've got money ter see me through, hain't yer?"

"Monk gave me two hundred for the agent and ter pay yer way."

"Waal, keep thet and say I tuk it."

Ben Haws shook his head.

"Say, I'll make it two thousand."

"Put your hand in my left side pocket, pard, and yer'll find ther money."

Ben Haws obeyed, and the sight of the new, crisp bills made him excited with joy.

"Count 'em, pard, and say it's a go."

"I'll do it," and he thrust the money into his pocket, took out the keys and unlocked the irons from the prisoner.

Quick as a flash Buzz Saw seized the revolver from Ben Haws's belt and covered him.

"Now, pard, hold out yer hands!"

The driver begged and swore, but obeyed, and the irons were clasped upon his own wrists, and he was made fast to the coach, which had been brought to a standstill when Haws began to release his prisoner.

The Jew peddler was snoring peacefully within the coach, so Buzz Saw had no fear of him.

Then he took the money from the driver, which Monk had given him, and said:

"I'll borrow one of your leaders, pard, soon as I rob the Jew."

"It was petter es yer don't rob t'e Jew!"

The words fell upon the ears of the startled Buzz Saw like a clap of thunder from a cloudless sky.

The Jew was leaning out of the coach window and had his rifle cocked, the muzzle not a foot from the head of the man he addressed.

"Drop down dose veapons, mine fri'nt, or I plows you up mit t'e sky!"

The weapons were laid down as ordered.

"Now git yourselves down mit t'e pox!"

Buzz Saw obeyed, and then Ben Haws, almost crushed by the shame of his position, was ordered from the box.

Out sprung the Jew, then unlocked the irons on the driver's wrists, and ordered them put upon the prisoner again.

This was done and then came the words with no accent whatever:

"Pard Buzz Saw, I was sent as your guard to Omaha, for it was feared you might escape."

"And you, driver, have had a lesson, so I'll not report your proving false to your trust."

"But the money given you by this fellow is counterfeit, as he has not a dollar of genuine money with him."

"Now, Pard Buzz Saw, you ride inside with me, and if you come any funny business, I'll obey my orders and kill you."

Ben Haws warmly thanked the man who had spared him from exposure, and mounting his box drove on, a wiser man by far.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SCOUTS ON THE TRAIL.

FALO BILL and Wild Bill were determined to slip away from Kate's Kitchen without the fact being known to other than the landlady and the man who stood guard in the stable.

They had paid their bills and bidden farewell to their hostess and Gambler Lou, and going to their rooms had slept for several hours.

Then they slipped out of the hotel, sought the stable, and having paid the man there a liberal fee, secured their horses, mounting and riding out of the rear way.

"Well, Buffalo, we have given the slip to old White Hair and his red-skin pard," said Wild Bill as they gained the trail and headed for the Shadow Valley.

"Yes; but I'd give much to know who that old man is, and why he shadowed us, which he certainly did; but he was game, and friendly too, for he was at our side in the rumpus to-night."

"Indeed he was, and his Sioux pard too; but isn't that Bravo a dandy?"

"He is indeed; but what do you make of his arresting that man Buzz Saw to-night and putting handcuffs upon him?"

"Buffalo, I have thought over that matter until I am tired."

"That Bandbox Bill positively wearies me trying to cipher him out," said Wild Bill.

"Yes."

"He said that he was going away."

"So he did."

"Let us go by his Jay-out and see if he is there."

"What then?"

"Well, we can call him up and tell him we were on our way, and wished to again thank him and say good-by, asking him to visit us at the fort when he went there."

"I'm willing; but may he not get up and trail us after we leave?"

"No; for we can ride rapidly, and before he can get ready we will be far away, and the night is too dark for him to track us, and when day comes we can cover up our trail."

"All right! I'd like to know, I confess, if he is really at home or not."

So the two scouts turned aside and went to the cabin of the Bravo.

They approached it warily, and called out when near.

All was dark within and no response came.

They called again, with like result, mentioning their names.

But all was silent.

They went around to the stable and listened.

"Bill?"

"Yes, Buffalo."

"There is not the photograph of a sound in this stable."

"That means both his horses are gone."

"Yes."

"And the dogs are not in the cabin, I am sure."

"Then the whole lay-out have skipped."

"So it seems."

"Where?"

"I give it up; but let us push on."

Their way led them by the graves of the two men whom the Bravo had killed when lying in ambush for them.

"Those fellows are at home, Buffalo," said Wild Bill, in his quaint way.

"Yes; but we won't call."

And on the two scouts rode.

Both were splendidly mounted, and their horses had had a good rest in Hallelujah City, so they pushed on at a good pace until an hour before dawn, when they went into camp at a place where they had camped on their way to the mines.

Confident that they had thrown their shadows off their track, they did not worry in the morning, but took it leisurely and several times halted to cover up their tracks.

They wished to enter the Shadow Valley at a certain point where they deemed there would be less danger of their meeting any of the Toll-Takers, so camped early, determined to push on the next day on foot, when they had found a hiding-place for their horses, as they had decided to take the advice of the Bravo about not going mounted, so as to leave no trail.

Could they find a good hiding-place for their animals, they knew they could leave them for twenty-four hours at least.

The place was found, at the head of a canyon, and the horses were fenced into a space where there was good grass and water, the scouts cutting down small trees to serve as a barrier with hatchets which they always carried.

Then they had supper and lay down to sleep until midnight, when they arose and started for the Shadow Valley.

They had gone but a mile when a light flashed upon their vision.

The rays came from over a ridge, and they cautiously made their way to where they could obtain a look down into the canyon.

What they beheld fairly startled them, iron-nerved though they were.

They looked down into the head of a canyon, not unlike the one in which they had left their horses.

There was a stream in it, a plot of grass, and some scattering trees.

The ridge surrounding the canyon, and where they stood, was heavily fringed with trees.

There was a fire burning in the canyon, and staked out were five horses, and two more were feeding without being secured.

These latter were as black as jet, and a saddle and a pack-saddle lay near them.

Not far from the fire, which cast a cheerful, ruddy glow through the canyon, lay two huge black dogs, apparently resting after a jaunt, and near them were some blankets spread down, showing where some one had made a temporary bed.

But this was not all, for in the canyon were five men.

Two of them were Indians, two were men at work with pick and shovel, and each digging a grave.

The third was Bandbox Bill the Bravo.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE WEIRD SIGHT.

THE two scouts gazed at each other in the darkness, as though striving to read each other's thoughts at what they beheld.

The scene fairly startled them, as they gazed down into the canyon.

There were two Indians whom they never remembered to have seen before, and these stood rifles in hand, as though guarding the two white men who were digging the graves.

And those two grave-diggers?

The scouts did not long remain in ignorance of who they were.

The huge form of the one on the right could be no other than Giant Bruce.

On the left was the man who had long been the terror of Hallelujah City.

It was Six-Shooter Sam.

Each Indian had his man under guard.

The two men did not work rapidly, but with a heavy manner, and from time to time they cast looks at their red-skin guards, and then over at the stern, silent man who paced to and fro, to and fro, not far from them.

The blazing fire casts its rays fall upon him, revealing his elegant form, clad in black, his top-boots with their glittering gold spurs flashing at every step.

His closely-buttoned coat, with the rather large sleeves, in which the scouts now knew were deadly revolvers, small, but of heavy caliber.

His broad-brimmed black sombrero partially hid his face, except when he turned toward the firelight in his ceaseless walk.

What could the scene mean, so wild, so weird, so portentous of something appalling to come?

Those two men, Six-Shooter Sam and Giant Bruce, the scouts knew had obeyed the Man in Broadcloth as their master.

He had commanded them to leave Hallelujah City, and they had gone.

The scouts knew that it was their work that had strung the man up before the cabin of Bandbox Bill, for the Bravo had told them as much.

He had told them, too, that some one had gone upon their trail, and that they were doomed.

Those two Indians had been the trailers, without doubt.

They had done their trailing well, too.

The Bravo had said that he had to go away.

He had kept his word.

There he was in the canyon, with his two black horses, his dogs, and two red-skins who evidently acknowledged him as their master.

There, too, were the pair of desperadoes.

But whose graves were they digging?

At last Buffalo Bill said in a whisper:

"Wild Bill, are those men calmly digging their own graves?"

"It looks so, Buffalo."

"It does, indeed; but they are two to three."

"You mean they should fight it out?"

"Yes."

"But the Bravo is there."

"True, and that means you deem it useless for them to make the attempt?"

"Yes, and more."

"What more?"

"That man commands them by his marvelous force of will, his secret power over them."

"What can it be?"

"I give it up; but they are doing the work all the same."

The men worked slowly.

It seemed an effort at times to sink ir picks into the earth and to shovel out the loose dirt.

The Bravo did not hurry them, but still kept up his tireless passing to and fro.

The Indians stood like bronze statues, silent, but watchful and ready.

"I should think they would make a break and have the red-skins shoot them," Buffalo Bill said.

"No, for they would only wing them, I am sure."

"Some moral force keeps those men at work on their own graves, and that force the Bravo exerts."

"Do you think we should interfere?"

"Buffalo, what could we do?"

"Demand that he spare those men."

"Buffalo!"

"Well?"

"This is not our funeral."

"Granted."

"It might be did we interfere."

"You surely do not fear the man, mysterious being though he is?"

"Don't you know that I never knew what physical fear was?"

"Yes, I grant that; but you spoke as though we would get the worst of it if we interfered."

"We might kill the Bravo from here, true; but those red-skins have their orders and would never allow those two to escape."

"Well, we can do nothing?"

"Why should we, for those men are two of the worst characters in the mountains?"

"You heard their pedigree thrice told, and they have been merciless desperadoes."

"That is true."

"They were driven out of Hallelujah, and halted, as we know, to kill the Bravo, and hanged a poor devil by mistake for him."

"He sent those red-skins after them, and they have got them fast."

"All true, I admit; but it looks cold-blooded to make them dig their own graves and then kill them."

"That is an idea, and we guess at it from what we see."

"We will wait and discover how it turns out."

Again silence fell between the two scouts, and then Buffalo Bill suddenly asked:

"Bill, what about the man Buzz Saw?"

"Oh, yes, the Bravo yanked him off with him out of the Queen of Hearts Saloon."

"Yes, and where is he?"

"Buffalo, I'm too tired to guess."

"I suppose he has turned up his toes."

"Like as not, for they get lead, steel and knife epidemics about Hallelujah, as we both discovered; but peace to his sawdust if he has gone," said Wild Bill indifferently.

"Well, when I find Miss Heloise, as I hope to do, I am going to camp on the trail of Bandbox Bill until I know all about him," Buffalo Bill said firmly.

"I'm with you, Buffalo, if from curiosity only; but see, the graves are about finished."

The two desperadoes had ceased their work, and turned toward the Bravo.

He halted in his walk, coolly looked at his watch, and said something in a tone that the scouts could not catch.

That the desperadoes were pleading with him they knew and they heard his voice ring out sharply:

"Don't be cravens! die like men!"

The desperadoes knelt down in the graves and the red-skins stepped toward them extending a small derringer to each, and which the Bravo had handed to them.

Then, before the scouts knew what was to be done, two shots rung out in rapid succession, and Wild Bill cried aloud:

"By Heaven! they have taken their own lives, Buffalo!"

At his voice the two dogs sprang up and uttered a warning yelp, and in an instant the Bravo had leaped forward, seized the blankets from the ground and dipping them into the brook threw them over the fire.

At once all was in darkness, and Buffalo Bill said:

"Come, we must go to the canyon and head him off, for he must know what we have seen."

They reached the canyon within ten minutes, but no one was there, other than the two dead desperadoes.

The fire had burnt up through the wet blankets and revealed the canyon distinctly again.

But the Bravo, the red-skins, horses, trappings and all were gone, having disappeared with wonderful quickness and so mysteriously as to fairly bewilder the two scouts.

"Bill, that was quick work."

"Yes, Buffalo."

"Well, let us fill in these graves and then go on our way."

"All right, Buffalo," answered Wild Bill, and half an hour after they were again on their way toward the Shadow Valley.

CHAPTER XL.

LARIATED.

THE sudden and mysterious disappearance of the Bravo and the two Indians, accompanied by their horses, and taking their traps with them, in so short a space of time, quite bewildered the two scouts for awhile.

The graves were there, with their occupants, the derringers still grasped in the hands of the two dead men.

Six-Shooter Sam had shot himself through the brain, while Giant George had sent a bullet into his heart.

The bodies were placed at length, the arms decently folded, and the graves were filled in by the scouts.

"Buffalo, it seems on this trip we have been busy burying other folks' dead," said Wild Bill, in his quaint way, for he always had a peculiar way of looking at things.

"Yes; they make four, Bill," was the answer.

The fire had burned up brightly through the wet blankets, and the scouts threw on more wood to make a better blaze.

They hoped if the Bravo was near and saw them that he would come and join them.

But this the Bravo did not do, so they went on their way toward the Shadow Valley.

They halted on the ridge overlooking the valley until dawn, eating a cold breakfast, for they cared not to build a fire then, and when the sun arose went forward once more.

Their object was to find some trail and lie in wait there until some one would come along.

If the Woman in Black, they would reveal their presence and ask her about the kidnapping of Heloise Hembold and if she was then a captive of the Toll-Takers.

If it proved to be an outlaw they would lariat him, and it would not be their fault if threats did not force him to reveal all he knew and, perhaps, be their guide to the retreat.

While hoping for the coming of the Woman in Black they heard hoofs approaching.

They were upon a trail often traveled, and their position enabled them to command a view up and down the valley, while remaining hidden themselves.

They had hidden in a group of rocks upon the banks of a small stream crossed by the trail.

Any one coming along must pass within fifteen feet of them.

On the tops of the rocks grew some stunted trees and bushes where they lay in hiding; but the rocks seemed placed on the bank of the stream for their especial benefit, for they could glide among them and use the weapons which they had brought along at the suggestion of the Bravo—their lariats.

They had been perhaps an hour in their place of concealment when they heard the sound of hoofs approaching.

Quickly they looked one in each direction, and Buffalo Bill said:

"It's a horseman, and he is coming at a canter."

"Quick! to our positions for throwing our ropes."

The men at once crouched down among the rocks, ten feet apart.

Buffalo Bill was to throw a second before Wild Bill, and his aim would be the rider.

Wild Bill was to lasso the horse.

The man came on little dreaming of danger.

He was a slim-built, small man, with a red beard and long hair, and dressed in buckskin.

A belt of arms was about his waist and a rifle hung at his saddle-horn.

That he was one of the Toll-Takers the scouts were certain.

He was well-mounted upon a wiry horse, a sorrel, and drew rein in the brook to give the animal water.

That was the scouts' chance and they took advantage of it, for Buffalo Bill threw his lariat with sure aim.

Until it settled over him the man had no thought of peril.

Almost at the same instant as the startled horse threw up his head, Wild Bill sent his coil flying and it settled around the animal's neck.

The frightened horse, with a loud snort, bounded forward, to be thrown down in the stream as the lariat became taut, for the other end was made fast to a small tree.

The lasso of Buffalo Bill, shorter than the other, had yanked the rider out of the saddle, and brought him with a loud splash in the water.

The brook was some two and a half feet deep there, so the fall of the horse and rider was broken and did no harm.

As the man plunged out of the creek, dripping wet, he was met by Buffalo Bill with his revolver.

"Pard, I want you," he said, quietly.

The horse was caught by Wild Bill, and the two were led around among the rocks.

"Who are yer?" demanded the man, as soon as he could speak.

"That was the question we were about to ask you, and as we have the call on you, just give us your pedigree, pard," said Cody.

"I am a miner in ther mountains."

"Yes, and you get most of your dust out of pocket mines, I guess."

"I don't understand you."

"Well, I mean you are a Toll-Taker."

The man's face paled at this charge; but he said, indignantly:

"I am nothing of the kind."

"I am an honest miner."

"What are you doing in this Shadow Valley, then, for you are not prepared for a long journey?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for just such men as you."

"I am no outlaw."

"Well, we differ with you about that, and we advise you to talk straight, for there is a rope about your neck."

"I have nothing to say, more than I have said."

"Where are you just from?"

"My mine."

"Where is it?"

"Up in the Valley."

"There is no mine there."

"That shows you do not know."

"Where are you going?"

"To see a pard."

"Where?"

"Over on the ridge."

"Well, we must search you, my friend."

The man winced at this, and tried to spring away.

But the clutch of the scouts held him firm, and Wild Bill soon drew a letter from his pocket.

It was wet, but the address was plain—

"Major Mephisto."

"As you do not carry the United States mail, pard, we'll take the liberty of reading this letter."

And Buffalo Bill opened the envelope and read, written in a woman's hand:

"Come, for you are needed. W. I. B."

"Pard, this letter would hang you, if we were not disposed to be merciful."

"Do you deny now that you are a Toll-Taker?"

"Why do so? for it is useless, I see."

"Who is W. I. B.?"

"I will not tell you."

"Woman in Black that might stand for, and I guess it does. Eh, Wild Bill?"

"Sure, Buffalo; but what is to be done with this gent?"

"He must talk if he expects to save his life."

"I have nothing to say," was the dogged response.

"Well, I have a number of questions to ask, and your answers will save your life, or lose it."

"Now, Pard Toll-Taker, make up your mind whether you wish to live or die, for I have orders to kill at sight every outlaw of your gang."

And the manner of Buffalo Bill showed that he was in earnest.

CHAPTER XLI.

AN ELEPHANT ON THEIR HANDS.

THE scouts placed themselves before their prisoner like men who were determined to stand no trifling, and to let the man know who they were, as though by accident, so that he would understand that they had the power to act, Buffalo Bill incidentally called his companion by name.

"Wild Bill! Are you Wild Bill?" asked the outlaw, quickly.

"That's what men call me, pard, and this is Buffalo Bill."

"What, chief of scouts at Fort B——?" asked the man, uneasily.

"Yes."

"Then, if I had you both prisoners I could get a snug sum."

"How so?"

"There is a standing price on your heads among the Toll-Takers."

"You honor us," said Buffalo Bill, dryly.

And then he said:

"Your words admit that you are a Toll-Taker."

"Granted."

"Then talk straight, if you don't wish to die."

"I have nothing to say, as I told you."

"Where are the Toll-Takers?"

"In their retreat."

"Where is that?"

"Anywhere, everywhere."

"Major Mephisto is your chief?"

"So it is said."

"How many are in your band?"

"Enough to worry all the military and scouts on the border."

"Are you aware that when taken none of your men are to be spared?"

"None have been spared when taken, so the future will be no worse than the past."

"Have you any prisoners?"

"I am not the jailer of the band."

"Is there not a young lady captive in your retreat?"

"If I knew I would not tell you."

"There is a Woman in Black who is connected with the Toll-Takers?"

"Every one knows that who travels these trails."

"Who is she?"

"A Woman in Black is all I know her as."

"Where is she?"

"Attending to her duties somewhere."

"Where is the chief?"

"He is always on duty."

"Pard Buffalo, that fellow has not answered a single question you asked him."

"Shall I give the rope a pull?"

"No, Wild Bill, for I wish to give him every chance before he gets to the end of his rope."

"Well, he had better talk now."

"Once for all I will not betray my comrades."

"You are a Toll-Taker?"

"I am."

"You were going with this message to your chief?"

"I was."

"You refuse to tell and accept your life?"

"I do, for there is honor among thieves, it is said."

"You do not care for life?"

"I do."

"You can get a handsome sum in money if you will betray them."

"I will not do it."

"Then, Buffalo, he is no good to us, so let's hang him," blurted said Wild Bill.

"Just as you say, Bill," and Buffalo Bill placed the lariat about the man's neck.

But he did not flinch.

"There is a tree, so let us run him up to that."

"All right," and they led the man to the tree.

He walked firmly, and though his face was very pale he showed no sign of fear.

Wild Bill threw one end of the rope over the limb, while Buffalo Bill bound the man's hands behind him.

Then the latter said:

"Just five minutes to tell what you know and get a reward in the bargain with your life and freedom, or to hang."

"I'll hang," was the cool response.

"You've got nerve anyhow."

"I need it in my lawless calling, and took my life in my hands when I entered upon it."

"It is death sooner or later, so go ahead."

The two scouts looked at each other and Wild Bill said bluntly:

"Pard, you've got too much nerve for an outlaw, and ought to be a square man."

"I am sorry you will not confess what we wish to know; but we won't hang you, and had no idea of doing so."

"That's just what I thought, Buffalo Bill."

"You did, eh?"

"Yes."

"And why?"

"I have heard much of you two men and never yet that you were guilty of a mean act, or of killing a man in cold blood, so I did not believe you would hang me yourselves, though I dreaded that you might."

"You're a queer one," said Wild Bill.

"What are we to do with him, Bill?"

"Ask me something easy, Buffalo."

"You cannot let him go."

"Certainly not."

"As we cannot get anything out of him he is an elephant on our hands."

"I'd rather have an old buffalo bull for my share."

The outlaw laughed outright.

"You are a funny chap, pard."

"Oh, I take life as it comes and goes."

"Well, Buffalo, let us put the uppers on him and gag him, so if any other durned fool comes along he can't yelp and give us away."

"All right, we'll put him in a safe place."

The outlaw was then ironed, and his feet tied to his hands so that he could not escape.

He made no resistance and Buffalo Bill said:

"I hate to treat you badly, pard, for I admire your pluck; but I must."

"Oh, certainly, for I'd give you away if I could."

"Well, I'll have to gag you."

"That's not pleasant, but go ahead."

He was accordingly securely gagged, and they were about to take him further over among the rocks when the splashing of water startled them.

They had been so thoroughly wrapt up in their prisoner that for once they had forgotten their caution.

There was some one coming along the trail, and then crossing the brook.

The prisoner's horse was securely hidden, as they were also; but they sprung to a position for resistance if need be, and a moment after a horse and rider came in sight, not fifty feet from them.

CHAPTER XLII.

A PROMISE.

"HOLY smoke! Buffalo, it's the Woman in Black," hoarsely whispered Wild Bill, as the rider and horse came into view.

"It is," answered Cody, and he quickly added:

"You shin around the rocks and head her off in the trail, while I come out behind her, for she cannot escape us then."

This plan was speedily adopted, and the horse-woman drew rein as she saw Wild Bill step out in the trail before her.

Then she wheeled her horse as though to retreat by the brook.

There she beheld Buffalo Bill in the trail.

Upon one side was the ragged group of rocks and the thicket, which no horse could pass over.

Upon the other was a deep water-wash, fully twenty feet wide.

For an instant she seemed about to drive her horse to take the leap, but with a start of only a couple of lengths she seemed to realize that he could not make it.

Seeing that she was entrapped, she remained silent and expectant, while the two scouts approached her.

Right where she had halted was the bound prisoner, not thirty feet away from her, but out of sight.

The scouts gazed upon the woman with strange interest as they approached her.

She was certainly a superb-looking woman, with faultless form, clad in deep black, and sitting in her saddle like a queen.

Her face was very pale, her eyes large and lustrous, and both the scouts had the same thought at once that they had known her somewhere.

But they could not place her, try as they might.

She bowed haughtily as they advanced, and in spite of their belief that she was an outlaw, they raised their sombreros.

"May I ask if you deem me your prisoner, sirs?" she said, in a voice that was strangely musical, and to which there was the tinge of a foreign accent.

"If you are the Woman in Black, we came to the Shadow Valley to see you," Buffalo Bill responded.

"And why, may I ask?"

"We have known of kind acts that you have done, of men that you have warned of danger in this valley, and we felt that you could not be wholly bad."

"I have done what I deemed my duty, serving two masters though I have had to."

"Two masters?"

"Yes, conscience and one other."

"You have certainly served your conscience well, for not long since you saved Keen Kit's coach from robbery."

"Worse, perhaps; in fact, far worse."

"And you have warned others of dangers in this valley."

"Therein I was serving my conscience."

"Well, we are anxious to have you do another good deed."

"Name it."

"Had you seen us here, ere we discovered you, would you have warned us of danger?"

"Yes."

"May I ask if you are really connected with the band of outlaws known as the Toll-Takers?"

"Of myself I have nothing to say."

"Will you tell us if there is not a captive among the Toll-Takers?"

"There are several."

"One is a young girl?"

"Ah! who do you mean?"

"Miss Hembold."

"Do you deem her a captive?"

"Yes."

"She came of her own free will."

"Did she tell you so?"

"I have not spoken with her."

"Who told you so?"

"The one who brought her to the Valley."

"And he is—"

"The second in command of the Toll-Takers."

"Well, I happen to know that she was kidnapped, as my friend here also does, and that you have not been permitted to see her is further proof."

"It may be so."

"Do you know one who is called the Bravo in Broadcloth?"

The woman started and asked quickly:

"What know you of him?"

"We owe him our lives."

"So do many others owe him the same debt."

"He is dwelling in Hallelujah City now."

"So I have heard; but what causes you to speak to me of him?"

"We told him that we were coming to the Valley of the Shadow of Death to rescue Miss Hembold, feeling confident that she had been kidnapped."

"Well?"

"He advised us to seek you and you could tell."

"Sent he no message?"

"None."

"He said nothing more?"

"No."

"Well, I will see what I can discover for you, as to Miss Hembold being a willing or unwilling sojourner here."

"If the latter, I will aid you; but if the former I will not interfere."

"We can ask no more, certainly."

"Where are you camping?"

"We are in temporary hiding among the rock— By Jupiter! I forgot all about the prisoner."

"As I did, Buffalo."

"What prisoner, may I ask?"

The scouts looked troubled and Buffalo Bill responded:

"Unintentionally we have betrayed you."

"How so?"

"We caught a horse and rider awhile ago with our lassoes, and we could not force him by threats or bribes to tell us anything we wished to know."

"A man on a sorrel horse?"

"Yes."

"A courier?"

"Yes, he bore a letter which we read."

"To Major Mephisto?"

"Yes."

"Where is your prisoner?"

"Bound and gagged, and just over behind that rock."

"Then he has heard all?" and the woman's face showed her anxiety.

"He has, I fear."

"Then he must not escape, for you do not know how fearful would be the result."

"He is a plucky fellow, and we hated to cause him to suffer."

"Yes, he is a brave man; but he is true as steel to his outlaw comrades, and it would be better to kill him than that he should escape."

"I mean just what I say, as some day you may know."

"He shall not escape, I promise you."

"See to it that he does not, sir, I beseech you."

The woman was in deadly earnest now, and the scouts saw it.

Then Buffalo Bill asked:

"When will you tell us of Miss Hembold?"

"Three days from this, at noon."

"I will show you where I will meet you."

"You cannot do so before?"

"No, it is impossible."

"Then lead us to where we are to meet you."

"In the mean time keep out of this valley."

"Yes, we will."

"And do not let this man, Iron Dick, escape."

"We will see to it that he does not."

She leant forward and whispered:

"Follow my trail when I have disappeared from sight in yonder timber."

"Blindfold your prisoner, and when you come to a retreat into which I have ridden and turned back in, make it your camping-place until I come there two days from this."

"We will do so; but can we bring our horses there, as we left them out of the Valley?"

"Yes, it would be better to have them with you."

"Now I will go," and with a wave of her hand she rode off.

Half an hour after they followed, having mounted the prisoner upon his horse.

A walk of several miles brought them again in sight of the woman, evidently awaiting them.

Buffalo Bill walked forward alone and she said:

"You already know the spot, for I observed your horses there."

"I will be there in two days," and again she rode away.

"Well, this is a surprise party," said Wild Bill as he discovered that the rendezvous appointed by the Woman in Black was where they had concealed their own horses.

CHAPTER XLIII.

OTHERS ON THE TRAIL.

HAD Buffalo Bill and his pard, Hikok, known who it was that they were trying to throw off their track they would have given it up as a useless undertaking.

The Two Bills had been friends with Surgeon Frank Powell and Texas Jack too long not to know that they were their equals in prairiecraft, cunning and courage.

The four had scouted many a time together, and stood back to back in some desperate fights for life.

They were true as steel to each other, and both Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill, if told to select two pards who should go on a trail of desperate danger with them, would at once have chosen Frank Powell and Jack Omohundro.

In fact, they had felt great regret, and so expressed themselves, that the surgeon and the Texan were not near to be able to go with them on the trip to Hallelujah City.

The reader already knows that, aside from the fun they had in deceiving the Two Bills, both Jack and Surgeon Powell retained their incognito on purpose, hoping to the better benefit them in the end.

When, therefore, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill slipped away from Kate's Kitchen at night, as they believed, unseen by their shadowers, the surgeon and the Texan followed them on foot until they saw just what trail they intended to take.

Then they returned to the hotel, and, paying the clerk, whom they aroused, they mounted their horses and rode as far as Bandbox Bill's cabin.

Here they halted for the remainder of the night, as they knew the Bravo was away from home, and they did not care to go wrong on the trail of the Two Bills.

With the dawn they had breakfast, and then mounting they rode on.

They were too experienced as trailers to be at a loss to follow the trail of the scouts, and when they knew that they had gained on them until they were not very far ahead, they went at a slower pace.

But the nature of the ground soon became such that to follow the trail was slow and tedious work, and at times they became alarmed about finding the tracks when lost.

They knew that the Two Bills were going toward the Shadow Valley, and they had the alternative of pushing on there, if they utterly lost their trail.

But they persevered and at last got on the right track again.

All the next day their progress was slow; but they came near night upon the retreat where the horses had been left; but they ventured no further than to see that it was their camp.

Then they knew that the scouts had made that spot their base of operations, and they established themselves not far away, also in a secluded nook.

By some means Texas Jack's horse had slipped his halter and was gone the next morning, and evidently remembering his good treatment at the stable of Kate's Kitchen, he had taken the back trail in that direction.

Mounting Surgeon Powell's horse, Texas Jack set off in search of his own animal, and it was late in the night before he returned.

But he brought back the runaway with him. This brought the time down to the day when the Woman in Black was to visit the retreat of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill.

Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack had a late breakfast, and seemed in no hurry to move, for Frank Powell had reconnoitered late the evening before and told the Texan that the scouts were still in their retreat.

"Well, Doc, I guess we had better go over and join them, this morning, and make ourselves known," said Jack.

"We'll happen in on them, Jack, and not give our secret away until we have had some fun with them about following their trail."

"Good! we'll get Wild Bill mad and then tell them who we are."

This being decided upon, the two mounted their horses toward noon and rode over in the direction of the camp of the scouts.

They went along a ridge which gave them a view of a level stretch of land, and at once they beheld a party of horsemen riding slowly along and evidently following a trail.

The trail led in the direction of the scout's retreat, and Surgeon Powell remarked:

"We have not the time to warn them, Jack; but we can get there to the funeral."

"Yes, and they'll be glad we followed their trail, I'm thinking, for there are just a dozen men in yonder party."

"Yes, too many for even Cody and Hikok to fight alone, especially as they must be Toll-Takers."

"But we will even up matters some, and then the surprise we will give the outlaws will count for a good deal, Jack."

"You bet it will, Doc; but let us be making our way to the scene, for we must not arrive too late."

"No, and I only hope that the outlaws will not surprise them."

"If we had only been half an hour sooner."

"But we were not, so let us be moving, and, Jack, I guess we are going to have a lively time of it."

"Well, it won't be a picnic for us, I am certain."

With this the two friends rode on, and Texas Jack took off the spectacles he had put on, which went to prove that he wished nothing to destroy his aim in the strife which he was sure must come.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MEXICAN MONTE.

ONE meeting Mexican Monte would never dream that he was an outlaw, the trusted Lieutenant of Major Mephisto, the mysterious chief of the Toll-Takers.

He was a fine-looking young man, with the dark face and black hair and eyes of a Mexican. He affected the Mexican dress, was a good deal of a dandy in his make-up, and was as cruel as his looks were innocent.

He rode along a trail one afternoon, some days before Heloise Hembold left the fort, and was smoking a cigarrito with the air of one who had nothing upon his mind and was at peace with the world in general.

He held on his way to a spur of the mountain, where, sheltered himself, he could view a vast expanse of country, and he placed a glass to his eyes and looked over the expanse, his vision following a trail faintly outlined for miles.

"He is coming," he muttered as he saw a horseman coming along the trail.

As the horseman drew nearer the trail he unrolled a red flag, attached it to his rifle and with the breech upon his thigh thus rode along, allowing the little square of silk to flutter as he moved.

Mexican Monte drew from his pocket a red flag and placing it upon a stick he waved it three times, and the horseman in the valley came on at a gallop.

The man coming along the trail was in uniform, and his equipments were military.

He was well armed and accoutered for the road.

Upon reaching the top of the spur he saluted Mexican Monte politely, and the latter asked abruptly:

"Well, how goes on at the fort, Marquand?"

"As well as you could wish, Captain Monte."

"What have you done?"

"I have my allies ready to spring a trap when opportunity offers, sir."

"How many have you in your pay?"

"A woman and two men."

"Are they enough for the work?"

"Ample, sir."

"There must be no failure."

"There shall not be, Captain Monte."

"Give me notice in time when you intend to spring your trap."

"I have as one of my allies, sir, a scout, a perfect borderman, and he shall leave with news to you the moment all is arranged."

"Accomplish this for me, Marquand, and I will make you a rich man; but if you fail me, I fail, too, and I shall have to continue an outlaw, but not as second in command, for it frets me to have a master."

"You do not like Chief Mephisto, then, sir?"

"Oh, I like him well enough, yes; but he is as haughty as Lucifer, and more, I do all the work, for he is seldom with the men."

"You think he will give up the command, sir?"

"I don't know that he would willingly; but he will under my persuasion, and you shall step into my shoes as I now am and be my lieutenant, Marquand."

"You are kind to me, Captain Monte."

"No, I am just, for you have been true as steel; but, mind you, I am talking now of what will be if our plot fails."

"If it is successful, why, we will be rich, give up outlawry and live as gentlemen far from here."

"Heaven grant the plot is a success, sir, for this is a life of terrible risk we lead."

"Yes, I grant it is; but if we fail, then, as chief I will gain a fortune by lawless acts, and this Overland will ring with my deeds of daring."

"But you must not delay here, so return to the fort, while I go back to my den of thieves," and Mexican Monte laughed.

"A few bank-notes won't go amiss, captain, for I have to pay liberally, you know."

"Ah, yes," and the Mexican handed over a roll of bills, which Marquand put into his pocket, and saluting rode away.

The Mexican watched him for awhile and then turned his horse back on the trail he had come.

A ride of a dozen miles brought him to the head of the Shadow Valley.

A narrow canyon, cutting through a mountain range, was the pass into the valley at that end, and there was stationed a mounted sentinel.

Mexican Monte stopped and talked with him for a few minutes, and then rode on into the pass.

Half a mile beyond was a camp in the very fastness of the rugged range.

It was the camp of the Toll-Takers, their abiding-place for the time being, for they seldom remained a month in one place.

The camp was one that could move away in fifteen minutes' warning.

Though the Toll-Takers seemed to have no regular retreat, they had a score of secure camping-grounds which could be well defended, and they seemed to haunt the Valley of the Shadow of Death more than any other locality.

Riding up to an army tent upon the hillside, Mexican Monte dismounted, threw the rein of his horse to a peon Indian that came forward, and asked, in the Mexican tongue:

"Any news, Ponto?"

"None, señor."

"Any word from the chief?"

"No word has come to your quarters, señor."

"Where is the fair spy the chief has upon our movements?"

And Mexican Monte spoke with a sneer.

"Off on the trails, señor, for she has not returned since leaving this morning."

The young outlaw officer made no reply, but threw himself into a hammock swung near his tent and was soon fast asleep.

Hardly had his eyes closed in slumber before a horsewoman rode past his quarters.

It was the Woman in Black, and she passed on up the hill to where several army-tents were grouped together; but, like the tent of the Mexican officer, they were all painted a dark-brown.

A negro took her horse, and a negress met her at her tent and handed her a note.

It was written in cipher, and after reading it she said, half-aloud:

"I must warn them of their danger, for their lives are too valuable to be thrown away."

"I will go to-morrow, for they are on the trail, this says."

Then she threw herself into a camp-chair and seemed lost in viewing the scene before her, the two-score of outlaws encamped upon the hillside below her, their horses feeding in the valley, and the grand expanse of canyons, vales and mountains.

Certainly it was a strange fatality which had brought that woman to be a dweller among outlaws, for hers was not the face of one whose heart was wicked.

It seemed a cruel destiny for her to follow, and the sorrow that seemed stamped upon her beautiful face showed that she suffered deeply at her lot.

CHAPTER XLV.

A WELL-SET TRAP.

THE cipher note which the Woman in Black had received, upon her return to her quarters in the camp of the Toll-Takers, caused her to mount her horse the following day and ride away alone.

That she had kept her promise to warn some one of danger, the reader knows, for the letter from a spy had informed her that Texas Jack and Surgeon Powell, from Fort L—, were to venture into the Shadow Valley, and in disguise, and they could have but one motive in going there.

That same afternoon a messenger came into the camp to see Mexican Monte.

He handed him a letter, also written in cipher, and quite a lengthy one.

Whatever its contents, it seemed to interest the Mexican deeply, for he read it over and over again.

Then he said to the messenger, who had the appearance of being a scout:

"You had the signals, of course?"

"Yes, captain, they were given to me by Marquand."

"Is your horse able to return at once?"

"Marquand said you would give me a fresh horse, captain."

"I will, so get some food, and here is a reminder that you must go back with all speed," and he placed some money in the man's hands.

"When you return, say to Marquand that the plan is a splendid one and cannot fail, for I will carry out his every suggestion."

"Yes, captain," and the man departed with the peon, who fed him well and then got for him a fine horse from his master's corral.

The next night Mexican Monte mounted his best horse and rode away from the camps.

He passed by the quarters of the Woman in Black, and said, as he raised his sombrero:

"I am going upon a special scout for a couple of days, and when I return I expect to bring company."

"Should the chief arrive meanwhile, pray explain my absence, and will you please take command until my return?"

The Woman in Black simply bowed, making no response whatever.

As Mexican Monte passed on she muttered:

"He has some black deed on hand, I know; but I have not one near that I can send on his trail."

"Yes, he got a message while I was absent, Cynthia told me, and that is what carries him away."

"Some one, he says, will return with him—Heaven have mercy upon them!"

"Ah! there go four men up from the camps, and they will accompany him, I am sure."

"Yes, one is that outlawed pony-rider of the Pacific trail, and the other three are as precious a trio of rascals as there are in the band."

"There is some devilry going on, I am sure, but just now I am powerless to discover what it is."

The Woman in Black was correct about the three men going to follow on the trail of Mexican Monte, for they overtook him before he had gotten a mile away from the canyon camp of the Toll-Takers.

To show that the Woman in Black was also right in saying that they were bound upon some mission of devilry we have but to follow their trail to discover.

Mexican Monte had picked his men well, and he knew just what he had for them to do.

He led the way, and late that night they went into a camp in a snug retreat not very far from the Overland Trail.

Here they prepared to make themselves comfortable, for the two pack-horses were unsaddled and their packs revealed a very good supply of clothing and provisions had been brought along.

Mexican Monte evidently did not deem a guard necessary, for none was placed, and the men were allowed to cook supper and turn into their blankets at will.

The next morning no move was made, and not until after the noon meal did the little camp awaken to life.

Then one of the packs was opened and revealed a side-saddle, some soldiers' uniforms and a costume such as was worn by the Overland Pony Express riders in those days.

Not long after a man rode into camp.

It was the scout who had visited the outlaw officer the day before.

He carried a bundle with him, which he gave to Mexican Monte, along with a letter, and after a short rest and some dinner, departed with the remark:

"Marquand thinks it best I should return at once, captain."

"Yes, and he says there will be no mistake at his end of the line."

"None, captain, for you have the skirt and hat, along with other things he sent, and the letters are written and all ready."

"Good! then there shall be no mistake at this end of the line, for my men know just what they have to do," and Mexican Monte seemed to be in a good humor with all mankind as he watched the messenger ride away.

Half an hour after the young man who had once been a Pony Express Rider, put on his rig, and receiving a letter and some instructions from Mexican Monte, mounted his horse and rode out of camp.

Two hours after his departure the other three men dressed up in the uniform of cavalry soldiers, and also left the camp, after certain instructions from their leader, and they carried with them a led horse.

Then Mexican Monte was left alone, and he began to pace to and fro.

The shadows deepened in the canyon, and darkness came.

Then the man threw some wood upon the live coals of the camp-fire and had a cheery blaze.

The firelight made weird, dancing shadows about him; but he heeded them not, but paced to and fro until hours passed.

Then he started, for sounds came to his ears.

The sound of falling hoofs, and soon after four horses with riders rode into the canyon and up to the camp-fire.

The Mexican sprung forward, and said to one who rode by the side of the outlaw wearing a sergeant's uniform:

"Senorita Heloise Hembold, I am glad to meet you again."

"Monte Miranda! my God! how I have been deceived!"

The one who uttered the almost despairing words was Heloise Hembold.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE CAPTIVE.

FOR a moment, after recognizing how she had been entrapped, Heloise Hembold seemed almost overcome.

Then she rallied quickly, and her splendid pluck came back to her, and she asked with indignant anger:

"What does this outrage mean, Monte Miranda?"

"It means that when I visited you at the fort I read a proposition to you which you were pleased to refuse."

"I have decided to carry out my plan, and so kidnapped you."

"It was a most clever plot, and as a villain you are to be congratulated upon your cleverness."

"We will discuss that as we ride along, for I prefer not to remain here."

"Come, my gallant Pony Rider and soldiers, we must be on the march, so resume your true colors, pack up and get ready."

"I will see that our fair captive does not escape."

Thus ordered the men set to work, while Monte stood by the side of the young girl's horse, his hand upon her bridle-rein.

"You have time to explain this outrage now, sir, if explanation you can give."

"I can explain, oh, yes, but whether the explanation will be satisfactory to you I do not know."

"I will be the judge, sir."

"Well, fair señorita, I visited you when you were in New York at boarding-school."

"I know that well, sir."

"I was then an officer of Lanceros in the Mexican Army, and you were a mere school-girl; but I explained to you my situation, and yours."

"I understood your situation, thoroughly, sir."

"I told you that I would come again in time."

"And you came."

"Yes, I sought you at the fort, when your father was in Washington Territory."

"Perhaps it was well for you that he was away."

"Perhaps; but I visited you, and you again refused my love."

"I did."

"Although you knew how much was at stake upon your answer."

"I preferred not to sacrifice my happiness, sir, by marrying a man whom I despised."

"Despised! why, girl, women have not found me despicable."

"They have not read your character as I have, they have only seen your handsome face, fine form, and looked not into your heart."

"You speak as though you knew me to be a villain."

"I suspected you were at heart a villain when you first visited me in New York."

"When you came to the fort I was more convinced that you were, and now I am assured of it."

"You are not complimentary."

"Because I am truthful."

"Well, you have ruined me, for had I returned to Mexico with the pledge that I asked from you, all would have gone well; but instead I held no such pledge, I was overwhelmed with debts, and shot my most importunate creditor, a brother-officer, in a duel, as a warning to others not to drive me; but they were too numerous, so I was forced to resign from the service."

"You were forced to desert and were dismissed, for I read it in a Mexican paper."

"Ah! you keep up with the times, then?"

"Yes, even with the Mexican times," and Heloise laughed.

"Then you know all I lost from your refusal to sign the paper I asked?"

"I knew when you visited the fort that you were a fugitive from Mexico, though I did not tell you so."

"For the sake of appearances I received you as a gentleman whom I had known before."

"When you left, you had my decided answer, and promised never to come near me again."

"Now, by one of the boldest plots I ever knew, you have kidnapped me."

"It was clever, was it not, and shows what a genius I have."

"I never doubted your genius for wrongdoing; but you have had allies at the fort to carry out your plan so successfully."

"I grant that."

"To-morrow, however, you will find that you have made a mistake, for my father will have a regiment upon your track."

"See here, sweet Heloise, what care I for a regiment, when the frontier army have been on my track for over a year?"

"Hal that means—"

"What would you say?"

"You are an outlaw."

"You just said you had read in the Mexican paper that I was a deserter and fugitive."

"Yes, and the terrible suspicion forces itself upon me that you are *Major Mephisto*."

The young Mexican laughed, but made no reply.

His vanity was such that he was willing to be thought the famous outlaw, Mephisto.

"You do not deny it."

"I deny nothing, neither do I admit anything."

"Well, I can believe anything of you, Monte Miranda."

"Thank you."

"Now tell me why you have kidnapped me?"

"Don't you know?"

"If I did, I would not ask."

"You know what I urged upon you once before?"

"Yes; to pledge myself to become your wife."

"That is it."

"And you expect such pledge from me now?"

"I expect more."

"More! what is your demand?"

"That you become my wife and return with me to Mexico."

"I will die by my own hand before I would do so," was the plucky response.

And, the men being ready for the march,

Monte gave the order to mount and they moved away into the darkness.

The horse ridden by Heloise had a rope about its neck and the other end was made fast about the horn of Monte's saddle.

The ex-Pony Rider, who had so well done his work, rode in advance with one of the men, and the others followed close behind with the pack-horse, so that escape through making a bold dash faded from the heart of poor Heloise.

CHAPTER XLVII.

IN THE CAMP OF THE TOLL-TAKERS.

NATURE had certainly aided the villain, Monte, in keeping his captive a secure prisoner.

He had returned to his camp, and, upon the side of an overhanging cliff, forty feet from the ground, was a shelf of rock.

Back of this projection was an opening some dozen feet in depth and as many wide, and the front had been walled up with logs, thus forming a pleasant room.

A cot, an easy camp-chair, and a rude table comprised the furniture of the room, and some books, a guitar and a large bundle of clothing, which had been taken by Marquand from Heloise's rooms, and sent to the outlaw camp, were on the cot.

Such was the position of the young girl, and the place was reached by the narrowest of paths up the side of the cliff, here and there made safer by a log, or rail, and at the bottom an outlaw guard was stationed, so that escape was wholly prevented.

The Mexican had the quarters all ready for his captive upon her arrival, and viewing the place, as she reached the shelf of rock, she said coolly:

"Better quarters by far than I expected, and the view from here is grand."

"I see a negress over there, Monte Miranda, so I suppose you will allow her to bring my meals and serve me?"

The man was nonplused by the cool courage of the girl, and replied:

"I will ask the permission of the Woman in Black for her to do so."

"Ah! the Woman in Black?"

"She then is a friend of yours?"

"No, she is here, however."

"I have heard much of her, and such strange stories are told about her."

"I would so love to see her."

"That cannot be; but Cynthia, her negro servant woman, I will ask to look after you."

"Thank you; but this then is the camp of the Toll-Takers?"

"Yes."

"How picturesque, and to think that I am a captive of outlaws."

"It is really most romantic, Señor Miranda."

He hardly knew what to say, for her bantering manner nonplused him.

Then she asked in the same light manner:

"How many cut-throats have you in your band, Monte Miranda?"

"Enough to keep at bay all the soldiers your father may send here."

"I doubt it, for if Buffalo Bill leads them as guide, you'll find that the soldiers will be here some pleasant morning."

"You forget what I told you?"

"I really cannot recall to what you refer."

"That I left a forged letter in your room to your father, that you had left him of your own free will."

She winced at this, but answered:

"Was the forgery of my writing a good one?"

"Perfect."

"Ah, yes, I recall now also that you were said in the paper to be a clever forger, and had written certain autographs of others so pat that you really got money upon them."

"Well, maybe father will be deceived, but I doubt it."

"I am sure that he will; and expect no further pursuit of you, for I had your clothes and other things taken from your room and brought here."

"I am glad of that."

"Yes; for it will seem that you really did desert your father and run away."

"Alas! so it will."

"Then, my ally at the fort will spread the rumor that when your father was up in the Columbian country I visited you there, and was supposed to be your lover, and as I had been seen of late about the fort, it was proof that you had run off with me."

"You have played your cards boldly and well, Monte Miranda; but let me ask what your intention is regarding me?"

"I'll tell you that the first parson or priest my men can catch they will bring here, and he shall make you my wife."

"I prefer death to you."

"I'll see to it that you live, at least until it is known in Mexico that you are my wife."

"Then I can return there, for I'll soon arrange any trouble there may be brought against me."

"Now you know my plan, and if you submit gracefully all will be well, and I will make concessions to you; but, if you refuse, it will be the worst for you."

"Here are your quarters, and here you are to remain."

"I will send the negress to you, and you will not suffer here, I feel assured."

With this, Monte turned upon his heel and left the captive alone with her own thoughts.

He wended his way over to the quarters of the Woman in Black, who received him in the same cold, haughty manner.

"Señora, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Well, sir?"

"I have a captive in a retreat on the cliff, upon the keeping of whom a great deal depends, and it will benefit the chief as well as myself."

"She is a young girl, and I ask you to allow your negress, Cynthia, to look to her wants, if you will be so kind."

"Cynthia shall care for her, and I will also see that she wants for nothing that I can supply her with."

"Where is she from?"

"The fort."

"I fear you have overstepped your authority, sir."

"No, the chief will be satisfied with the explanation I offer, I am convinced."

"It is for the chief to decide, of course, Señor Monte," and the woman bowed as though to terminate the interview.

Mexican Monte turned away and went to his own quarters.

The woman he did not understand, and he stood in awe of her.

He knew that she hated him from the day the chief had brought her to his camp, and though he, Monte, was in command of the band in the absence of Major Mephisto, he was well aware that the word of the Woman in Black was law, and that the men would disobey him before they would her, if it came to a question between them of which should rule.

The men feared her as he did, and their chief they stood in terror of, though he was ever kind to them they were forced to admit.

"Never mind, I will soon make Heloise my wife, and then I'll leave this life of peril and outlawry for one of wealth and happiness," mused Mexican Monte.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE SCOUTS AT BAY.

To say that Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were not anxious, as to the position they found themselves in, would not be correct, for they were.

They had, as it were, an "elephant on their hands," in the outlaw prisoner.

He had shown a nerve and a sense of honor they had not expected to find in an outlaw, and so had put them in an unfortunate position.

They had met and talked with the Woman in Black, and she had given them at least cause to hope that they could rescue Heloise Hembold.

This was their paramount object now, and they could work at trailing the Toll-Takers afterward.

But this prisoner bothered them.

He was cunning, bold and fearless, and they knew that to hold him they would have to be over severe in their treatment of him.

He told them that he had heard what the Woman in Black had said, and he was amazed to find that she was a traitress.

She was second only to the chief in power in the band, and to feel that she might, at any moment, betray them all, was a surprise and cause of anxiety to the outlaw.

If he could only escape, he would at once denounce the Woman in Black and save the band from destruction.

But to escape was no easy matter.

He was ironed, and a lariat passed around a tree kept him from going away.

Then, too, one of the scouts was constantly near him.

Buffalo Bill had gone out for a short hunt, upon the morning when Texas Jack and Surgeon Powell had discerned the coming horsemen, and fortunately he also made the discovery of danger approaching.

Hastening to the canyon, he made known what he had seen.

To escape from the canyon with their prisoner was impossible.

Had it not been for him they could have mounted their horses and sped away.

They were, however, unable to do so with a led horse and a prisoner.

To set him free would be to put the life of the Woman in Black in danger from what he could tell of her.

But the thought came then that perhaps she had betrayed them after all.

They saddled their horses, made the prisoner mount and secured him to his saddle.

Then they led his horse and theirs into a space where they would be out of bullet-range, and took up a position to await the coming of the outlaws.

They had not long to wait, for the horsemen soon appeared in the canyon, and halting, half of them dismounted and took to ambush fighting methods.

They sent a volley into the scouts' position, and then threatened a grand charge; but the

two rifles cracked from the covert, and a horse and an outlaw went down.

This taught the Toll-Takers that they had to fight men who were dangerous.

So they began cunning tactics.

All dismounted and began to creep upon the position of the scouts.

Shots were exchanged, so that a scattering fire was kept up, but the damage done was slight.

The scouts fired seldom and then only when they believed that they could kill or wing a foe.

The outlaws fired often, however; but they still kept drawing in the line about the scouts.

When but a hundred yards away from the rocks that served as a breastwork for the Two Bills, hoofs were heard and half a dozen men rode up.

They were outlaws, and the game seemed now a most desperate one for the two men at bay to play.

Still, calm, determined and fearless, the Two Bills faced their foes.

If they had to die they would perish with a record for having fought to the end.

But they still had some ray of hope, for they were not men to give up, no matter what the odds were against them.

When the other outlaws came it made the force about ten to one against them; but Buffalo Bill quietly remarked:

"We have been in just as tight places before, Pard Bill, and gotten out."

"Yes, and if we don't get out of this we'll have company on the trail to the happy hunting-grounds," replied Wild Bill.

"You are brave ones, pards, and I delight in seeing you at bay; but the odds will down you, pards, game as you are and deadly in your aim," said the prisoner, who coolly watched the situation.

"Well, what is our loss will be your gain, pard, for you'll escape the rope, if we are doomed," Wild Bill responded.

It was now seen that the outlaws had decided upon a rush.

The horses of all of them were being grouped together down the canyon, and were to be sent on a rush for the scouts' position, with half a dozen men driving them from the rear.

As they swept down upon the position the outlaws on foot were to spring from their various places and run toward the little fort of rocks.

Certainly, though some must fall, the others would reach the goal, and when it came to a hand-to-hand combat between a dozen men and two, even though those two were Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill, there could be but one ending to it.

The start was made, and just as the horses dashed up the canyon, and the outlaws were springing from their position, even the scouts were startled to hear the rattling of revolvers from overhead, and to see horses and men go down.

A perfect hail of bullets was falling in the canyon, and the scouts, without wasting time to see who was befriending them, opened fire also.

The result was that the charge was checked, the mounted men wheeled their horses and dashed back for cover, while the loose horses ran here, there, and everywhere.

The outlaws on foot quickly sought cover, to be run out of it at once, for the unknown enemy above commanded their positions, and they fled from rock to rock, tree to tree, down the canyon to shelter around the turn, while a loud voice called out:

"Up to the ridge, half a dozen of you, and dislodge those devils, for there are only two of them."

"Only two? Lordy, I thought there was a dozen from the music they made."

"They are dandies, Buffalo," said Wild Bill.

"Yes, and our friends, Bill; but who are they?"

"See there!" and Wild Bill pointed overhead to where a man was visible coming over the cliff and down a lariat made fast to a tree above.

"The old trapper, as I yet live!" cried Buffalo Bill.

"Sure, and yonder comes the red," was Wild Bill's response.

CHAPTER XLIX.

NO COMPROMISE.

THE two upon the ridge, who had so promptly come to the rescue of the scouts, slid rapidly down the lariat, landing within a few rods of their comrades.

"Pards, we is heur fer biz," announced Texas Jack.

"Bless your old white head, you are a man, every bit of you, to come and take chances with us," said Buffalo Bill, earnestly, and he added: "And your noble red pard, too; but we are in close quarters."

"Yas, but we kin git yer out ef yer wants ter leave yer critturs, and ef not, we'll jist camp with yer and attend ther ball."

Quickly Buffalo Bill explained the situation, and then, as he looked squarely into the face of the supposed trapper, he said:

"See here, now that you have not your eyes hidden behind spectacles, I can see that they are not old eyes."

"No, I should know them, and— By Heaven! you are Texas Jack."

"True for you, Pard Bill, and Surgeon Frank and I have had our fun with you and Wild Bill."

"Surgeon Frank Powell?"

"Yes, Bill, done up in colors," said the surgeon.

And Buffalo Bill sprung forward and grasped his hand, while Wild Bill, after a genial handshaking, said:

"I thought it was asking a little too much of ordinary human nature for two men to come in to this death-trap to help strangers."

"But, pards, I feel now as if we had a regiment to back us."

"Yes; and I think my pards will find they have caught a nest of Tartars—my! Buffalo Bill, Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout, Texas Jack, and Wild Bill! What a handful of trumps! what a team to fight!"

"If the Toll-Takers only knew it."

Texas Jack and Surgeon Powell turned toward the speaker.

It was the outlaw prisoner, and Texas Jack said:

"Where did you get him, pards?"

"Caught him."

"Why not use him as a foil?" asked Surgeon Powell.

"How do you mean?"

"Is he an outlaw?"

"Yes."

"Those men attacking you are Toll-Takers?"

"Yes."

"He is a Toll-Taker, I suppose?"

"Yes, and the boss of them all."

"Wild Bill and I have been getting up a real affection for the gentleman."

"Then use him as a foil, letting the Toll-Takers know that you will kill him unless we are allowed to retreat unharmed."

"A good idea; but they don't know we have him, I suppose."

"Let him ride out and show himself, you holding the end of the lariat which is fast to his horse."

"Your plan is a good one, Frank, so work it out yourself," said Buffalo Bill.

Surgeon Powell at once stepped up to the prisoner and said:

"My man, we have no idea of being sacrificed, if you can save us, so we will use you to make terms for us."

"How so, sir?"

"I will tie two lariats together, and you ride your horse out the length of them."

"Yes, sir."

"Then bail your comrades, and tell them that if they will let us pass out with you, we will release you, once we get a good start."

"No, Powell, we can't do that, for he knows a secret that would cause the Woman in Black to be murdered by the devils if they knew it."

"Ah! then just tell them that if they attack us again that we will put you to death."

"Will they care?" asked the prisoner.

"I do not know, but you should."

"I have some good pards there who might stand up for me."

"Well, it is worth the trial," and the lariats were fastened together and tied to the horse.

Then the prisoner rode out boldly.

Before it was discovered who he was he was fired upon, the Toll-Takers thinking the scouts were riding out to make a dash for freedom.

The prisoner never flinched under the fire, though one of the bullets wounded him slightly on the shoulder.

"Ho, pards, do you wish to kill me?" he called out in a voice that rung down the canyon.

A chorus of voices spoke his name:

"Iron Heart Dick!"

"Yes, I am your pard, Iron Heart, the Pony Rider, and I am in hard luck, for I am in the hands of the Philistines."

"We kin see thet, dead sure," said a voice.

"Well, pards, it rests with you whether I die or live, for there are four scouts here, and they swear to kill me if you attack them again, while if you draw off and give them a chance to get out of this trap and a good start, they will spare my life."

No reply was immediately returned, and it was certain that the Toll-Takers were considering the proposition.

The ex-Pony Rider, the same man who had so cleverly taken the forged letter to Captain Willis, that enabled Mexican Monte to kidnap Heloise Hembold, was a general favorite with the outlaws.

They did not wish him to die; but they wanted the scouts taken.

Seeing that they were discussing the matter, Iron Heart Dick decided to help matters along, and as a proof that the men would keep their word, he called out:

"Pards, don't you fool yourselves with the belief that these men won't do as they say, for you have here at bay Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Frank Powell the Doctor Scout, Wild Bill and Texas Jack."

A perfect yell greeted these words, and the

scouts at once saw that their prisoner had made a mistake.

"They'll be that more anxious to take us now," said Texas Jack.

"All right, pard, if they don't trade, when night comes I'll climb the lariat, and take Jack's horse and go for help, for Captain Alfred Taylor and his brave troop are not camped so very far from here but that by hard riding they can get here by sunrise, and the boys of the Fifth Cavalry know how to ride to rescue friends," said Buffalo Bill.

In the mean time a voice called from down the canyon:

"Iron Heart, if we will draw off, will they set you free?"

It was Mexican Monte who spoke.

"No, captain, they will not."

"Then we'll carry their position and rescue you," was the determined reply of Monte.

CHAPTER L.

THE CHIEF.

FINDING that there was to be no compromise, the prisoner called out:

"All right, captain, do as you deem best with no reference to me—good-by."

Then he turned and rode back in among the rocks.

"Well, you are a cool one, pard," said Texas Jack, admiringly.

"May I ask if your chief is there?" said Buffalo Bill.

"He is not, sir."

"You called some one captain."

"Yes, our lieutenant, but we call him captain, as the chief holds the title of major."

"I see; but who is this lieutenant?"

"A Mexican, whose name is Monte, or, at least, we know him as Mexican Monte."

"Where is your chief?"

"I do not know."

"So your lieutenant is willing to see you die, it seems?"

"Yes; and I made a mistake in saying who you were, for they are now that more anxious to capture you."

"I suppose so, for all four of us have been your foes."

"Yes, rather."

"Well, they are welcome to open the ball whenever they see fit."

"I may as well tell you that not one of you will be spared."

"We do not expect to be, if taken."

"They will show no mercy, especially if Mexican Monte is in command."

"We ask none, and will fight them on their own terms," said Surgeon Powell, firmly.

"Gentlemen, I hate to see brave men like you utterly wiped out."

"Thank you; but we are very much alive just now, and while there is life there is hope," said Cody.

"Yes; but Mexican Monte will never attack you until sure, and he has sent for more men, I am certain, and he can throw a large force against you."

"He'll think there is a large force here," Wild Bill muttered.

"I see that your jacket is stained on the shoulder."

"You were wounded when they fired upon you, so let me dress the wound," said Frank Powell, in a kindly tone.

"Thank you, sir; but I don't think it amounts to much."

The surgeon, however, asked Buffalo Bill to unlock the irons upon his wrists, and throwing back the clothes of the prisoner revealed an ugly-looking flesh-wound.

"It is not serious, but is a ragged-looking wound."

And so saying, he set to work and dressed it with the same care he would have shown toward one of his immediate comrades.

The prisoner thanked him warmly, placed his hand again to have the irons locked on, and said, earnestly:

"I really wish some compromise could be made, for I will be pained to see you four men slain."

"You really think that we have got to die then?" Buffalo Bill asked.

"I can see no escape for you if Mexican Monte attacks you with nearly all the band."

"You think he will do this?"

"I am sure, for had he not sent to the camps for the rest of the men he would have attacked before this; but he will charge out suddenly upon you before very long, and woe be to all of you if they are not checked."

"That's what I think, pard; but there are four rifles here and eight revolvers, and some dead-shots to draw trigger, if I do say so, while we have a bowie apiece, and being as you will only be a looker-on, just mention it outside so the boys will know how Buffalo Bill and his pards handed in their checks," said Wild Bill.

"Under other circumstances I might enjoy the fight, but just now I will not, for I hate to see you sacrificed, and besides, the position I occupy will not be perfectly healthy, with bullets flying about."

"I'll remove you further back among the rocks."

"No, Buffalo Bill, my pards risk life to rescue me, and you risk life to keep me, so I'll not skulk, but take chances with all of you—Hark!"

"What is it?"

"I heard a bugle-note."

"Well?"

"Either Mexican Monte is calling the men to be ready for the charge, or—"

"Or what?"

"The chief has arrived."

"Major Mephisto?"

"Yes."

"What, then?"

"You may be able to make terms with him, for Mexican Monte will have to step back if the major comes—No, they are coming!"

As the prisoner uttered the words the Toll-Takers rode into view in the canyon, two hundred yards away.

They were all mounted now, and riding eight abreast, with two lines behind the leaders.

"Twenty-four of them," said Buffalo Bill.

"Twenty-five, for there comes Mexican Monte to lead them."

"Oh, he has pluck!"

As the prisoner spoke the scouts, peering over the rocks, saw a man dash to the front of the body of outlaw horsemen.

He was splendidly mounted, dressed in Mexican costume, and held a revolver in each hand. Certainly he was a dashing-looking leader.

Then the scouts counted the odds against them and felt that death was very near for all.

But as Mexican Monte wheeled in front of his horsemen and gave the order:

"Forward! Follow me!" the four rifles rung out and as many men dropped from their saddles.

That quartette of border heroes were not throwing away any shots, nor did they intend to waste lead.

On bounded the outlaw riders, but hardly had they gotten well under way when loud, ringing, clear, came the notes of a bugle.

It rung through the canyon in a hundred echoes, and each outlaw whose ears it reached, turned to the rightabout, while suddenly into view dashed a horseman, the bugle to his lips that was waking the ringing call to retreat.

"I was right! It was the chief, for there he is," cried Iron Heart Dick, the prisoner, and the eyes of the four men at bay turned upon the outlaw leader.

There he sat now in his saddle, dressed in black, with cavalry boots, gold spurs, a black sombrero, and a mask upon his face.

His horse was also jet-black, and covered with foam as though hard ridden.

The chief had arrived, and his men stood in silence before him, while the four scouts stood gazing in wonder at the scene.

CHAPTER LI.

MASKED AND UNMASKED.

THAT the outlaw chief was in an angry mood even the scouts could see at that distance, while Iron Heart Dick said:

"Gentlemen, somebody is going to suffer in that crowd."

"Somebody has suffered," grimly said Wild Bill.

"I mean that it's the chief's turn now."

"Ah, he's on the war-path?"

"He certainly is."

"What about?"

"I don't know; but he has ridden his horse hard to get here, and that bugle-note I heard awhile ago he sounded some distance off to let them know he was coming."

"Well?"

"If the boys heard it, and Mexican Monte ordered a charge after hearing it, then he will get himself into trouble."

"You think so?"

"I know so, and bad as my position is, I believe I would rather be in it than in the shoes of Mexican Monte this minute."

"I don't see that he has done anything against the chief," said Buffalo Bill.

"Well, he has been holding a pretty hard rein of late, while the chief has been absent, and he did something a few nights ago which, though I helped him in, I think will get him into trouble, and I guess it has, for it is my opinion the chief went to the camps, heard you were in the Shadow Valley, and that Mexican Monte was after you, so he put out to overtake his men and have something to say."

"See, he is talking to Mexican Monte."

"Yes, and the Mexican is excited, the chief cool as an icicle," said Wild Bill.

All watched the scene, and suddenly saw the chief take out a white handkerchief from his pocket, wave it and ride toward the scouts' position.

"Hello! is he going to surrender the whole gang?" asked Wild Bill.

"Something's up," responded the prisoner, who was most deeply interested in what was going on.

With utterly fearless mien the masked chief rode toward the scouts, simply letting his white handkerchief flutter in his hand.

"How easily I could pick him off," said Wild Bill, glancing along his rifle.

But he added:

"If that white flag did not protect him."

"He shows confidence in us," Buffalo Bill remarked.

"Which we cannot betray," Frank Powell added.

Until he was within sixty feet of the rocky barrier the chief rode, and there he halted.

The eyes of all were upon him, and it could now be seen that his superb black horse had been hard ridden.

"Men, I would like a word with you," he said, in a deep voice that rung with a tone of command.

"All right, sir, what have you to say?" Buffalo Bill responded.

"You have a prisoner in your midst?"

"Yes."

"It is one of my men, Iron Heart Dick by name."

"Yes, sir, we have the man."

"You offered to give him up awhile ago?"

"On conditions, yes."

"I wish now to offer you terms."

"I thought the chief wouldn't see me die," said Iron Heart Dick, the prisoner.

"What terms do you offer?"

"That you exchange your prisoner for one I offer in return."

"It's all the same to us," said Buffalo Bill, rather glad to give the brave Iron Heart a chance to escape.

"I will give you another prisoner, and allow you to ride out of the canyon unmolested, if you will at once take the trail for Fort B—and surrender your prisoner into the hands of Colonel Royston."

"We'll do it."

"The prisoner I give you in exchange is my lieutenant, Mexican Monte, who had disobeyed my orders, though he knew the penalty was death."

"Will you take him and go your way unmolested, in exchange for the prisoner you now hold?"

"We will, and we'll vouch for it that Lieutenant Mexican Monte will be hanged before he is a week older."

"So be it," and turning toward his men he called out:

"Bring the prisoner here!"

Two men advanced with Mexican Monte, securely bound and tied to his horse, riding between them.

The Mexican was very white, and he had a haggard look that was painful to look upon.

Buffalo Bill at once rode out with the prisoner and halting near the chief, he unlocked the irons from the wrists of Iron Heart, who said promptly:

"Thank you, Mr. Cody, and good-by."

"I won't forget you all."

"Now, sir, here is your prisoner, and I expect you to carry out your threat and have him hanged."

"Colonel Royston will need no urging, sir, I assure you, to perform so good a work," Buffalo Bill responded.

"I will now draw off my men, sir, and you will be at liberty to ride out at your pleasure," and the chief turned and rode down the canyon with the released prisoner by his side and the outlaw guard following.

The Mexican had uttered no word, but his teeth were set and his face had turned to the hue of a corpse.

Placing himself by his side Buffalo Bill saw that he was handcuffed, and also bound to his horse.

He took the bridle-rein and led the prisoner back to where the others awaited him.

"Well, pard, you have made good terms; but did you not recognize the chief?"

"There cannot be two such men—he looked like Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth!"

"Curse him! he is Bandbox Bill," broke savagely from the lips of Mexican Monte.

CHAPTER LII.

A GAME FOR LIFE.

IT was some little time before the scouts were willing to ride out of the canyon, and then Texas Jack suggested that he should climb up the lariat to the ridge, reconnoiter, get his horse and Surgeon Powell's, and meet them in the valley, where they would take the trail for the fort.

This was agreed to, and Texas Jack took his departure.

He had been gone but half an hour when they saw him appear on the ridge below, and he called out:

"All serene! they have gone."

Then out rode the others with their prisoner, silent and baggared-faced.

The discovery that the chief of the Toll-Takers was the Bravo in Broadcloth worried the scouts, for they had hoped for better things of their Hallelujah friend.

They had gained their lives upon a pledge to go to the fort and take the prisoner with them; but upon this plan they decided to hedge a little.

As soon as they met Texas Jack, with his own and Frank Powell's horse, the four held a consultation of war, and it was decided that they should go at once to the rendezvous where Jack

Crawford was to guide Captain Alfred Taylor and his men, and tell that daring and dashing officer the exact situation.

"He will at once say lead my troopers to the Toll-Takers' den, and then we can rescue Miss Heloise," said Buffalo Bill.

"Rescue Heloise Hembold, did you say?" asked the prisoner, quickly.

"Yes; what do you know about her?"

"She is my cousin."

"Then she is more unfortunate than I thought," said Surgeon Powell.

"Your cousin?"

"Yes."

"Is she in the camp of the Toll-Takers?"

"She is."

"You know this?"

"I do, for I have been intending to rescue her myself, and to-night was set to do so."

"You intended to rescue her?"

"Yes; for I tell you the truth when I say that she is my cousin."

"She is the daughter of a Mexican lady who was my father's sister."

"But I fell from grace, and was driven to outlawry."

"Heloise met a young man, an outlaw, whom she fell in love with and met clandestinely near the fort."

"So they arranged a plan for her to run off with him, which she did, and he brought her to the outlaw camp."

"His horse had fallen, however, and broke his leg, and the men had to carry him on a litter to the camp."

"She has cared for him most kindly, but all to no use, for he died last night, and I intended to take her back to the fort to-night, for the men were determined to hold her for a large ransom."

"She will return, then?" asked Buffalo Bill, who could see no reason for doubting the story.

"Yes. She promised me she would; but I cannot help her now, unless you are willing to trust me."

"Well, we will rescue her in a day or so."

"If you expect to find Major Mephisto and his men anywhere near their present retreat after dawn to-morrow you will be badly deceived."

"They will go, then?"

"Certainly; and you know how hard it is to find the Toll-Takers."

"What could you do if we trusted you?" asked Wild Bill, who saw the truth of the prisoner's reasoning.

"I could slip into the camps, knowing every foot of land as I do, and get my cousin out, bringing her to you; but I would wish your pledge to set me free when I have done so, for I take big chances as the chief would hang me if I was caught."

"It is worth the risk, pard, to rescue Miss Heloise," said Wild Bill.

"So do I say, pard," Texas Jack added.

But Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell were doubtful about the prisoner.

They knew Heloise Hembold well, and could not believe that she was one to run off with any man.

They thought that the Mexican told a most plausible story, however, and said as much, which made Wild Bill and Texas Jack urge the more to trust him.

At last Buffalo Bill said:

"How near to the camp of the Toll-Takers can you guide us after nightfall?"

"It would hardly be safe to venture nearer than a couple of miles."

"Well, we will halt that distance away, and I will go on with you on foot within easy hail of the camps, and await you there."

"All right, sir, and I will then slip into the camp and return with my cousin."

"This is the best we can do, I suppose, for, as he says, the Toll-Takers will be gone in the morning, and we all know what it is to find them," Wild Bill said.

So it was decided that the prisoner should guide them as near the camps as was safe, and then go on with Buffalo Bill on foot.

Upon his return with Heloise he was to be set free, and Wild Bill gave him this piece of advice:

"Then, pard, you had better levant for the sunny land of Mexico, for if we catch you again, you may not have a pretty cousin to save you from the rope."

So the scouts and their prisoner set off on the march, and just at nightfall the Mexican called a halt.

Then he was freed of his irons, and on foot with Buffalo Bill went toward the camp of the Toll-Takers.

After a walk of a couple of miles, the Mexican said:

"There is a sentinel put yonder, and you had best stop here, for I will have to work around him into the camp."

"I don't mind the risk of going with you."

"No, it is best for me to go alone, and if I am detained some time, do not be anxious, for I may have some difficulty, and then I wish to bring my cousin out upon horseback, if possible."

"Fast the sentinel?"

"Coming from the camps he will not be suspicious, and I can get the advantage."

"All right, go ahead, pard; but somehow I do not trust you, and only take the chances hoping to free Miss Heloise."

"If you fool me this time, beware of our next meeting."

"I will not deceive you, for I have too much at stake, as you know," and the Mexican glided away and disappeared in the darkness of the timber.

But once he had gotten fairly out of sight, he turned and looked back toward where he had left the scout, and, shaking his clinched fist, said in a voice hoarse with passion:

"Yes, I have so much at stake, Buffalo Bill, that you will never see or hear of me again."

"I will go to the camp and Heloise Hembold shall leave it with me, for Monte Miranda is not a man to be foiled in the plot of a lifetime."

CHAPTER LIII.

OVERTAKEN.

BUFFALO BILL and the Mexican had not been gone half an hour before the sound of hoofs was heard by the three scouts hiding by the roadside.

It was twilight, and they saw the form of a horse and rider, but the latter was dismounted and seemed to be following their trail.

"Lost anything, pard?" said Wild Bill, covering him with his rifle.

Up above his head went the hands of the man and thus he stood in silence.

"Hello, it's an Injun, pard!" cried Wild Bill.

"Yes, me good Injun, Night-Eyes."

"Well, you must have night eyes to follow our trail as you were doing."

"Where Big Chief Buffalo Bill?"

"Just now he is engaged on a little trip; but what do you want with him?"

"Have talking paper from chief."

"Ah! a letter? Produce it."

The Indian handed over a letter which he took from his head-dress and said:

"Go in timber and build fire so can see."

"We'll do it, and at the same time request the honor of your company, for I may not be up in Injun letters," and Wild Bill led the way.

A small fire was built in a secluded spot, and then Wild Bill looked at the letter.

It was addressed in a bold hand to

"BUFFALO BILL."

"On the Trail."

Opening it, for it was not sealed, Wild Bill handed it over to Surgeon Powell with the remark:

"You read it, Doc."

The following was the letter:

"FRIEND CODY:—

"My faithful courier, Night-Eyes, will hand you this on the trail, and I desire to offer an explanation and ask your aid."

"You knew me as Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, and to-day recognized me as the chief of the Toll-Takers."

"In truth I am acting in the latter capacity, but for a purpose, and that is the utter annihilation of the band."

"I write hastily now to say that my lieutenant, Monte Miranda, boldly kidnapped his cousin, Heloise Hembold, in my absence, and holds her a prisoner in his quarters in the camps, intending to make her his wife for a purpose she may explain when you see her."

"For this I demanded the exchange of prisoners, hoping you would hang him as he deserves."

"I was informed of this by my sister, the Woman in Black, and she now has Miss Heloise in her keeping, where she will be safe."

"I happen to know that Captain Alfred Taylor and forty of his men, with Jack Crawford as guide, Major Hembold and several other officers are camped in the White Cliff Canyon, forty miles from here, and if you will lead them to-morrow night against my camp, I will promise you that the outpost will be friendly to you, and the chaff, selected from the wheat, will be where you can surround and capture them."

"More I need not say other than to say that when you know me as I am you will find that I am not the candidate for the rope's end that you believe me."

"Yours,

"THE BRAVO IN BROADCLOTH."

"P. S.—Night-Eyes will guide you to the post to-morrow night where you are to enter the camps of the Toll-Takers."

To express the surprise of the scouts upon reading this letter would be impossible.

They quickly decided that Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell were right in not wishing to trust Mexican Monte, and that if Buffalo Bill was awaiting his return, "he'll be gray before he gets there," Wild Bill said.

As Night-Eyes said he could doubtless find the scout, Wild Bill went with him, and in an hour's time they returned with Buffalo Bill.

The latter read the letter carefully, and then started for the White Cliff Canyon.

They arrived at dawn, and the whole story was placed before Captain Taylor and Major Hembold, and the latter said:

"My friends, let me explain to you how my daughter is situated."

"My wife's father was a very rich man, but hated Americans with all his soul, so that he disinherited his daughter for marrying me."

"After her death he made a will leaving his vast estate to Heloise, on condition that she

should marry her cousin, Monte Miranda, a wild, reckless young officer."

"He hoped thus to get her back to Mexico, and wipe out all idea of America from her."

"I told Heloise the situation as soon as she reached her teens, and she vowed never to go to Mexico, or to marry her cousin, preferring to lose the fortune."

"The young scamp sought her at boarding-school, and driven out of Mexico by his crimes, I suppose, he came to the fort to see her when I was away."

"Then he became an outlaw and kidnapped her."

"Now you understand the situation, and to-morrow night my brave girl will be rescued from the spider's web spun about her young life."

Thus the truth became known, and by noon the gallant troopers were upon their way to the den of the Toll-Takers, for there was a deep mystery yet to be cleared up about the Bravo in Broadcloth.

CHAPTER LIV.

IN MYSTERY STILL.

TRUE to his promise, the Bravo's faithful red-skin courier led the party to a position near the den of the Toll-Takers.

Then he gave a signal, which was at once responded to, and a horseman rode forward to meet them.

It was the Bravo, and he said, in his quiet way:

"Mr. Cody, I would like a word with you, your scout friends, and the commander of these troops, with any one else you may wish to have hear what I desire to make known."

"I will ask Major Hembold also, sir."

"Certainly; I was not aware that he was with you."

And the Bravo led the way to a spot some distance from the troopers, and said:

"Gentlemen, I am no outlaw seeking to make terms by an act of treachery toward my men."

"But I am supposed by these men to be a different person than who I really am."

"The truth is, I am a United States Government detective, and I entered upon this work to hunt down one most dear to me."

"That one is my—my—sister, whom you know as the Woman in Black."

"I need only say that she married one whom she believed to be an honorable man, and her eyes were opened to the fact that he was a Mormon leader."

"He carried her to Salt Lake, and I vowed that she should be avenged and rescued from her cruel life."

"I sought, through certain influence I have, to get the appointment of a special Government detective, and then I began my work."

"I found that the man who had so deceived my sister was secretly the chief of a band of outlaws."

"In truth he was known as Major Mephisto and Chief of the Toll-Takers of the Trails."

"We met, and he fell by my hand."

"This man bore a startling resemblance to myself in face, form, voice and action, and taking advantage of it I played the bold game which will end the career of the Toll-Takers to-night."

"I went to their camps, in which I had been in disguise and gotten to know well, and made myself known to my sister."

"She, poor woman, at once said that she would aid me in my good work, and as the Woman in Black she did many a good act, saved many a life."

"But I had to play my cards well, and not to be suspected, I left the command of the band to Monte Miranda, with the Woman in Black to serve as a check upon him all she could."

"I picked out my men to spare, and made them detectives, and I had also a complete Secret Service league under me in the mountains."

"I knew when you and Wild Bill left the fort, Cody, and also the disguise which Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack assumed, and their mission."

"I sent the Woman in Black word of your movements, for I had men upon your trail."

"I need hardly say more, but that when I learned that Monte Miranda had kidnapped Miss Heloise, and the Woman in Black notified me, I came at once to the retreat."

"I found that outlaw scouts had discovered your presence in the valley, and the Mexican was determined to hunt you down."

"He was commanded not to do so by the Woman in Black, but refused to obey, and I arrived fortunately in time, and I only regret that he escaped, for he slipped into the lines last night, found Miss Heloise was gone, for the Woman in Black had taken her with her, and taking his horse and other weapons he made his escape."

"Now I will lead you into the den of the Toll-Takers, and the men who are outlaws are in one camp to-night, while my detectives are in another place."

"You can surround the Toll-Takers, and what you do with them is none of my business."

"Are you ready to move, Captain Taylor?"

"I am, sir," said the captain, who with the

others had been an amazed and interested listener to the strange revelations of a man who even yet was a mystery to one and all of them.

CHAPTER LV.

CONCLUSION.

THE "chaff," as the Bravo had called the real outlaws of the gang, were very quickly surrounded by Captain Taylor and his men, and after a sharp, short fight, in which a number fell, the remainder were captured and securely guarded.

The "wheat" were the detectives of the Bravo, and they were a bold lot of men; but not one of them knew anything about their chief's former life.

For reasons of his own the Bravo had given Iron Heart Dick his freedom and told him to get out of the way as quickly as he possibly could.

To describe the meeting of the father and daughter would be wrong, so I leave to the reader to imagine the joy of Heloise and the major.

The Woman in Black still kept in the background, after bidding Heloise farewell, and the next morning, when the Bravo took his departure for Hallelujah City, she accompanied him, while as an escort they had the two Indians, Panther Foot and Night-Eyes.

But before he took his leave the Bravo had a talk with Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, and told them that, to track the man who had wrecked his sister's life, he had himself turned Mormon, and among the secret band of which he had been made captain was Six-Shooter Sam, while Giant Bruce belonged to another company.

The laws of these leagues gave the chief power of life and death over the men, and when they did a wrong he could command them to die by their own hands.

These two men had deserted the Danite leagues to which they belonged, and, as has been seen, were forced to death by the command of the Bravo.

And further, Bandbox Bill made known that Kate Fenwick and Lou Gray had also married Mormons, to find out too late their mistake, and that he had urged them to remain in Hallelujah City, make a fortune, and then return to their homes, hiding forever the sad secret of their lives.

This they had done, and he added:

"Soon they will leave the mines, and with money to live on, no one will suspect how terrible has been their past."

"And you?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I have kept my incognito through all, for my sister's sake; but we have a home to go to, and we start to-morrow, so that you will doubtless never again hear of Bandbox Bill the Bravo in Broadcloth."

"Still, I will trust to your honor, and give you an address, Cody, you and Surgeon Powell, where a letter will reach me, and if you ever need my services as a border detective, write to me and I will come."

Some time after, when Buffalo Bill did have to call upon the Bravo for his aid, the scout discovered that he was a wealthy Texas ranchero, whose whole life had been a sad romance.

THE END.

Col. W. F. Cody—Buffalo Bill.

The Romance and Reality of a Remarkable Man.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

IN all American history, its romance and record of heroes of land and sea, military and naval, of the pioneer and the citizen, no one stands out more prominently than does William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill, as the typical specimen of what the United States can produce.

We have had men who have risen from the humblest walks of life to the Presidency of the country, self-educated boys who have become famous in the Pulpit, in the Press, before the Bar, in Literature, on the Stage, in Art, and in time of war afloat and ashore have made records for themselves among

"The few immortal names
That were not born to die,"

and with them is the name of one who lives

to-day as a hero, whose undaunted courage, indomitable will, hard Western pluck and genius have made him known the wide world over.

Buffalo Bill is truly a child of the Wild West, an offspring of the Great Divide, as it were, for he came from the "Land of the Setting Sun."

Born at a time, half a century ago, when the Far West was almost a *terra incognita*, his birthplace was a little village on the Mississippi River, a few miles above Davenport, Iowa.

Several years before he reached his teens, his father, Isaac Cody, journeyed with his family to Kansas, and made his home among the wild spirits of that then Territory.

There Mr. Cody lost his life, being killed because he dared express his views in opposition to the hot-heads who then held sway there, and "Little Billy" found himself the sole protector of his mother and sisters.

Anxious to lend his support to those so dear to him, Will Cody, only a boy of ten, appeared upon his pony one day in the camp of the Overland Freighters, Messrs. Russell, Majors and Waddell.

Going up to Colonel Alexander Majors, now an honored citizen of Denver, he asked for work, to aid in the support of his widowed mother.

"Why, my little man, what can you do in the hard and perilous life of an Overland Freighter?" asked Colonel Majors, looking him over with a critical but kindly glance, as the boy stood before him, his rifle in one hand, and holding the bridle-rein of his pony with the other.

"I could ride as messenger between the wagon trains on the march, sir," was the confident reply.

"That is a man's work, my son, and a most dangerous duty, for often the trains are far apart, the trails cannot be seen at night, there are Indians and lawless bands of whites to fear, and you could not stand the very severe hardships of the long, exhausting rides."

"Please let me try, sir, for I wish so much to help my mother, and I think I could stand it, as I ride a great deal and often have camped alone at night on the prairies."

The pleading look of the lad touched Colonel Majors's kindly heart, and he said:

"Does your mother know of your coming here?"

"No, sir; I wished to get the work and then tell her."

"Bring me your mother's written consent and you shall have a place as messenger; while, as you will do a man's work, you shall have a man's pay of fifty dollars a month!"

The boy's face was radiant, and, with a bound, he was upon his pony and away at full speed to ask his mother's consent.

It took a great deal of argument and pleading to gain that consent, but after she had visited the camps and had a long talk with Colonel Majors, she yielded, and "Little Billy" entered upon his duties, for which he was to draw a man's wages.

That was the starting point in the career which afterward made the name of Buffalo Bill famous, and he earned his first money and began to make history along with the other "Heroes of the Overland Trail."

The "boss" wagon-master of one of the trains was J. B. Hickock—"Wild Bill"—and from the first he took a strong liking to the Boy Messenger, and the friendship thus begun lasted to the tragic death of Wild Bill some years ago, at Deadwood, when he was killed by Jack McCall, whom he had often befriended, and who wrote himself down a cowardly assassin by his act.

Once started upon his career as a Border Boy, Buffalo Bill stuck to the trail with a perseverance and pluck that are wholly his own, and in his eleventh year "killed his first Indian," an incident in his life which he says scared him very nearly as bad as the Indian, but not quite, as he got over the shock, while poor Lo did not.

When Billy Cody drew his first pay upon his return from his trip across the plains, after a three months' service, he got his wages all in silver dollars to make the amount look as large as possible, and took it all home to his mother—every dollar of it. The fond mother was never so proud of her boy as when he told her all he had gone through

with, the dangers he had passed, the hardship he had endured, the satisfaction he had given his employers. He could have added that he had become an universal favorite with everybody on the Santa Fe trail, in the service of the great transportation company and overland mail carriers. Little Billy was their pet and pride, and no one was fonder or prouder of him than Colonel Majors, who called him his "Will-o'-the-Wisp," in view of the boy's activity and readiness for duty.

A year later he had an adventure while trapping with a comrade in the mountains, that very nearly cost him his life, for he broke his leg and was caught in a blizzard, having to lie up in a "dug-out" while his companion went a journey of days for help.

Another blizzard prevented his comrade's return for weeks, and a band of Indians found him, and but for their chief, who had once been befriended by the boy when he visited the Freighter's Camp, the red hostiles would have killed him.

Who can tell the mental and physical suffering of that mere youth as he lay there, in that lone camp hobbling about and cooking his food as best he could, watching and waiting for his friend's return, fearing that he might have been killed, and listening to the roaring of the mountain storms, and the howling wolves without?

At last his faithful pard did return with a sled and yoke of oxen, and Billy and the "pelts" they had trapped were taken home in safety and a snug sum was realized from the sale of the skins—a sum which went into the family treasure to the good mother's great comfort.

This bitter experience had done much to fit the boy for his future career, which, from that time, had in it all the adventure and romance the most daring youth could have longed for.

Freighting on the Overland Trail, trapping, hunting outlaws, and fighting Indians, took up the next few years of the life of the boy pioneer, work in which he learned by hard service and varied experience the rudiments of scouting, trailing and border craft that proved so useful to him in later years, teaching him self-reliance, inuring him to hunger, hardships and iron endurance. It is by such work and adventure as he then passed through that the true bordermen are made, learning their lessons in a cruel and merciless school, which only too often leaves them both a physical and moral wreck. Drifting with the tide, going where duty called and occupation offered, following the Star of Empire further and further toward the sunset, Billy Cody in turn became bullwhacker, wagon boss, mail rider, stage-driver, and Pony Express rider, and all while yet in his teens!

It was while riding "Pony Express," that he faced death on every run, from Indians, renegades, road-agents, and prairie pirates, and many a time his ready revolver and matchless aim saved his life and the valuable packages which he carried; while flying along, at race speed, on a full hundred-mile run, and changing horses every ten or fifteen miles, according to the nature of the country, it was work that only one of iron frame could stand.

But, he did stand it, and came out of it all with a splendid physique and muscular strength which, since, has been the admiration of his countrymen.

When the Civil War broke out young Cody entered the U. S. Army in a Kansas regiment. His past training and great popularity could have gained for him a commission, but he preferred, instead, the position of scout, and as such made a new reputation for himself, seeing most dangerous and arduous service, participating in some of the severest battles in the Southwest, and at the end of the struggle winning a medal for "gallant and valuable service rendered in the field."

Taking a fancy to army life, he went West again, and served as scout, guide and interpreter at a frontier fort.

It was then that he entered upon the career which has allied him to the army, and has won for him the respect of every prominent military commander upon the frontier from Leavenworth to Santa Fe, from Omaha to Fort Benton, comprising a wonderful range of service as guide and army scout, over Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Montana,

Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado.

He knew Denver when it was but a miner's camp; Leavenworth and Omaha when they were only military posts; North Platte where to-day stands his elegant home, when there was not a habitation near, save the tepee of the Indian; and Salt Lake, when it was but the unindicated locale of the present splendid capital of the now Mormon State. He has fought back the Indians step by step over spots where now are grand centers of population and wealth, as witness, the Queen City of the West; or, as it really is, the matchless metropolis of the Rocky Mountains and Plains—Denver, the Beautiful!

Appointed chief of scouts to the superb Fifth Cavalry, promoted to brigade and then division chief of scouts, Buffalo Bill won the hearts of the officers and men by his daring dash, his skill, his sturdy manhood, and his true nobility of nature.

Sent to guard and guide the advance of the Kansas Pacific Railway through a land of peril, he there made, for a second time, a claim to the name he now bears as "Buffalo Bill," for as a lad, on account of his prowess in bringing down the big game, Wild Bill had christened him "Buffalo Billy, the Boy Hunter."

The second claim to the name was when he killed, in one season, four thousand three hundred and sixty-two buffaloes, for the sustenance of the army of workers on the great iron highway.

This seeming slaughter was not mere destruction or "sport," but in the line of duty, and not a beast was felled which was not required for food. No person more than Cody disapproved the senseless destruction of the herd by so-called "sportsmen," and he clearly foresaw the early extinction of the noble game.

During his services as army scout, Buffalo Bill made some of the most remarkable rides on record, and through an unknown country, filled with hostile Indians. Chosen by General Sheridan as chief guide and hunter of the Grand Duke Alexis hunt, Buffalo Bill arranged all to the satisfaction of his commander and all concerned, getting old Spotted Tail and his village to camp near, so that the Russian Prince could see what the American Indian was, in his wild state. Calling Buffalo Bill aside, General Sheridan said:

"Now, Cody, I leave all to you; and remember the Grand Duke would not dare go home without killing a 'buffalo.'"

"General, I know where the herds are, but if they give us the slip, there is a sick buffalo over in the canyon near, and he can get him, for he won't know the difference," was Buffalo Bill's jovial reply.

Giving the Grand Duke his trained buffalo horse to ride, and explaining to him just what to do and what not to do, they started on the hunt and found a small band of buffalo.

The Grand Duke brought down his game and immediately suggested that they should go to camp and drink a bottle of champagne.

"Do you intend to open a bottle of champagne for every buffalo you kill, duke?" asked Cody, innocently.

"Yes, certainly, Guide Cody!"

"Then come quick; I have got a big herd over here just waiting for you to kill them," Buffalo Bill assured.

Whether the Grand Duke cared to keep to his resolve I need not say, but he certainly won a name as a daring hunter and expert buffalo-killer, and so pleased was he with his guide and director that he took a valuable pin from his scarf and presented it to him, while upon his return to Russia he sent him other presents, among them a gift from the emperor himself, which is now one of Cody's most precious treasures.

Having met Buffalo Bill in the West when on a hunting expedition, Mr. James Gordon Bennett of the New York *Herald* invited him to visit the East, and, soon after, urged by Colonel E. Z. C. Judson—Ned Buntline—to come, the famous scout decided to do so.

When he started for New York he carried letters of indorsement as to his career from Generals Sherman, Sheridan, the lamented Custer, Nelson A. Miles, now commanding the Department of the East, Crook, Terry, E. A. Carr, Merritt, Royall, and others.

The papers of New York teemed with mention of his deeds and personal character-

istics, and he became quite the lion of the hour—a fact that was seized upon by Ned Buntline to make an actor of him, there then being upon the stage a play called "Buffalo Bill," in which Jack Studley was playing the leading role.

After much persuasion Cody consented, and sending West for Wild Bill and Texas Jack, then famed as scouts and frontiersmen, to join him, they opened in Chicago in the "Scouts of the Border." If he ever repeated a word of the lines Buffalo Bill says that he does not remember, and when he and his two pardes faced the audience it took all of Bunt-



BUFFALO BILL.

line's pleading, praying, scolding and profanity to keep them from stampeding and taking the first train for the Far West, never to go East any more.

But, they got through, and had a most fashionable audience, the receipts being over three thousand dollars for the week.

Speaking of the play, Ned Buntline stated that he had written it in four hours; whereupon the papers wanted to know what he was doing *all that time!*

Still, it was a real melo-drama—a play, as a play, of marked merit—and Ned Buntline's genius as a literary man none will dispute, as his scores of novels attest.

Buntline's play served as a means to an end, for it made a powerful impersonator of

Buffalo Bill, and if he was criticised by some, the critics did not fail to recognize the fact that he was depicting scenes through which he had passed, life which he had known, impersonating no fictitious characters, but simply acting Buffalo Bill:

Taking up the man as a hero whose life, deeds and character were wholly real, the writer of this sketch, his "Pard on Plaza and Plain" for many years, found in Buffalo Bill such a fruitful fund for the pen of the romancer that he has written story after story, with the demands ever growing from the increasing host who now enthusiastically admire the man and are eager to read of deeds and adventures in which Buffalo Bill was chief actor.

Other writers have followed in the same fields—Leon Lewis, Major Sam Hall, Major John M. Burke, and the star of army novelists, Captain Charles King; while poems were written of and to the great plainsman, in this country and abroad, until to-day hundreds of novels and scores of biographies or biographic sketches are to be found the world over.

As an instance: a naval officer told me that, while he was stationed in China several years ago, he met a book-agent there selling the *Life of Buffalo Bill and the Bible!*

As his fame grew, Buffalo Bill was sought after by publishers for sketches for their literary papers, and finding that he also possessed genius as a story-teller, he received very large sums for his novels, numbers of which were published by Messrs. Beadle and Adams of the *BANNER WEEKLY*, of New York—so many, indeed, that this publishing firm have a series of "Buffalo Bill Novels," both from the scout's own pen and from the pens of other authors named, the great scout being the central figure or title character.

Telling his story in an interesting, modest direct way, with no flourish of words or tawdry sentiment, Buffalo Bill is as entertaining as a writer as he is as a conversationalist.

Having made a success in all his undertakings from messenger boy on the Overland, bullwhacker, trapper, hunter, wagon-master, stage-driver, Pony Express rider, soldier, guide, scout and Indian-fighter, down to actor and author, and after making a considerable fortune, too, in his work, it occurred to Buffalo Bill to interpret in realistic life the true scenes and incidents of the Wild West.

The idea of producing before the public in an arena the veritable wild scenes, Indian battles, scouts and soldiers on an Indian trail, redskin villages, their dances, Overland stage travel, attacks on settlers, and all else the pioneers of the West knew so well, was considered an impossibility, but with money and brains to back him, Buffalo Bill won a new triumph, as the "greatest showman on earth," making Barnum himself take off his hat to him!

After several successful tours in this country, he chartered a steamship, and, with Mr. Nate Salsbury as his partner, sailed for Europe, where he conquered instant success, being received by the queen, and the Prince of Wales, and was introduced into all the famous clubs, and became the guest of many of England's most prominent men.

Presented by the Queen and the Prince and Princess of Wales with costly gifts, Buffalo Bill commanded the same respect and admiration from the crowned heads of Germany, Austria, Italy, the Pope of Rome, the President of the French Republic, the rulers of Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Sweden, and the Sultan of Turkey.

Mr. Nate Salsbury shared everywhere in these honors, and deservedly so, for it was his efficient management of the tour which carried the *Border Life of the New World* into the Capitals of the Old World.

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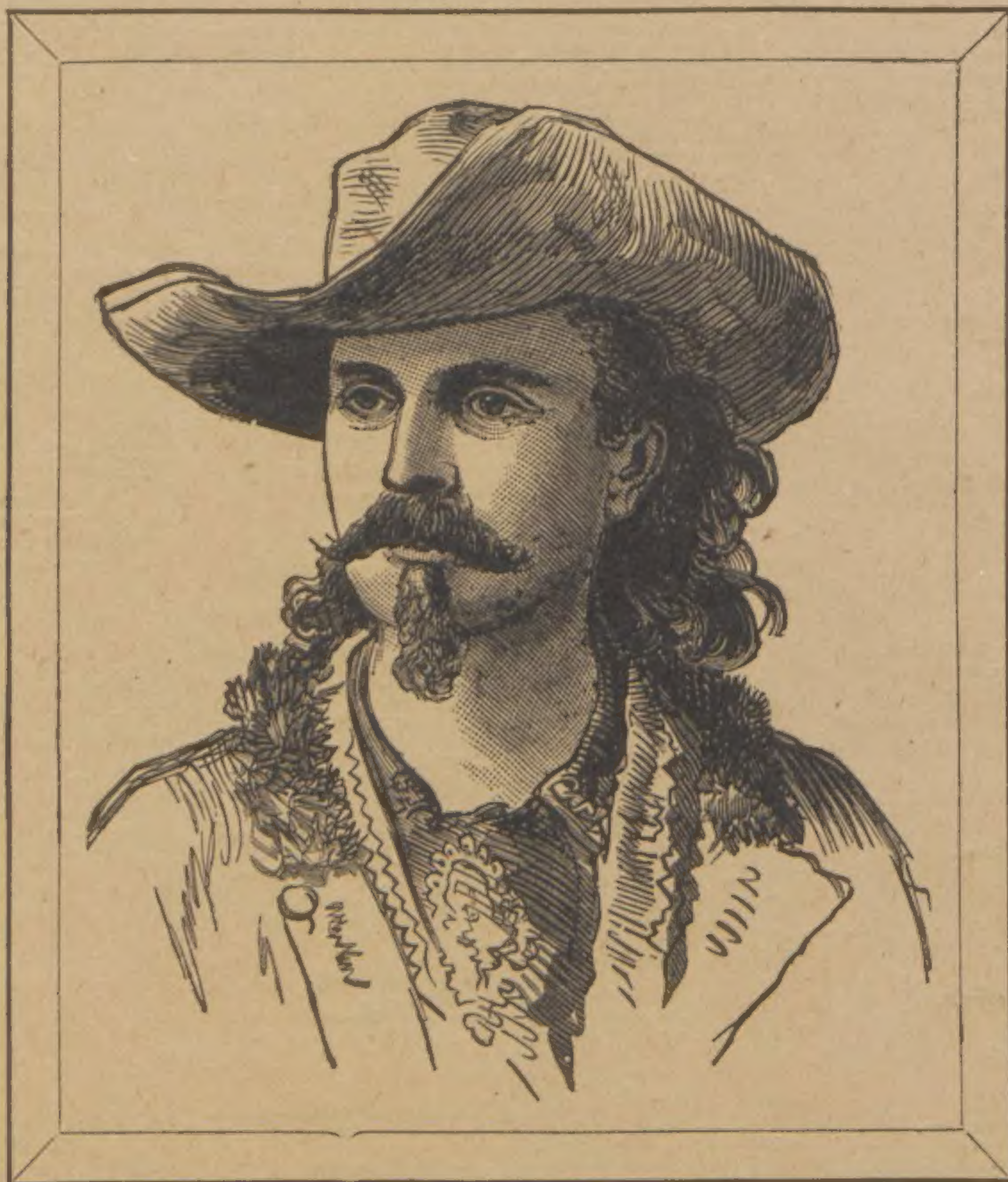
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